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ORIGINAL FAIRY TALE

THE WHITE RABBIT OF INABA

AUTHOR: TSUKUYOMI SASAMI

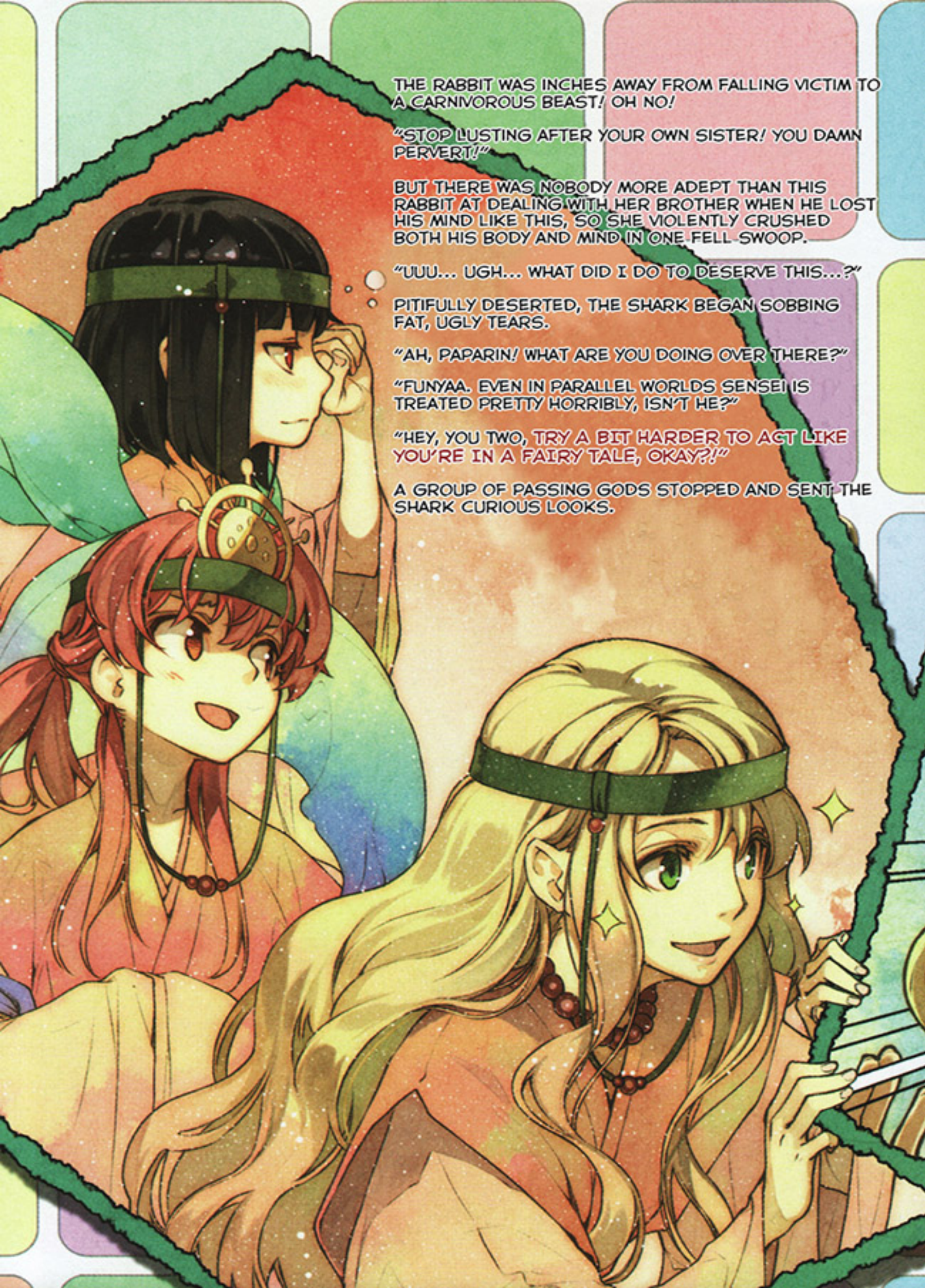
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A LONG, LONG TIME AGO.
A TIME WHEN THIS LAND WAS STILL FILLED WITH MANY GODS WHO ROAMED AND DID AS THEY PLEASED.
IN A CERTAIN PLACE, THERE WAS A SINGLE, VERY WISE, VERY CUTE LITTLE GI-
RABBIT. THERE WAS A LITTLE RABBIT.
JUST RECENTLY, SHE HAD STOPPED SHUTTING HERSELF IN HER ROOM AND STARTED GOING OUTSIDE.
TODAY, THE RABBIT WAS ON HER WAY TO SCHOOL, WHEN SHE NOTICED A HUGE RIVER IN FRONT OF HER BLOCKING HER WAY.
"WHAT SHOULD I DO? MY CLOTHES ARE GOING TO GET ALL WET."
THE RABBIT STOOD THERE, NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO, BUT THEN FROM THE RIVER BOTTOM APPEARED MY BROTH- A SHARK.
A SHARK APPEARED, AND BEGAN TO GAZE RUDELY AT THE LITTLE RABBIT.
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(1) THIS ENTIRE STORY IS A PARODY OF THE INABA HARE MYTH, IN WHICH A RABBIT/HARE TRICKS A SHARK INTO TAKING IT ACROSS A RIVER. AND YES, THEY ARE COMPLETELY DESTROYING THE FOURTH WALL HERE.


AND SO, THE RABBIT STEPPED ON THE SHARK AND SAFELY MADE IT TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER.
IN THE ORIGINAL TALE, THE RABBIT USES A BUNCH OF SHARKS TO GET ACROSS, BUT MY BROTHER HAD CROSSED THE WILD RIVER ALL BY HIMSELF. HE WAS EXHAUSTED THROUGH AND THROUGH, AND HIS BODY WAS ALSO COMPLETELY BEATEN UP BY BIG STICKS THAT HAD BEEN CAUGHT UP IN THE CURRENT.
"THANK YOU, MR. SHARK. BECAUSE OF YOU, I WON'T BE LATE FOR SCHOOL."
EVEN THOUGH THE RABBIT PROPERLY THANKED THE SHARK, THE SHARK DIDN'T SEEM SATISFIED, AND WITH HIS ENTIRE BODY DRIPPING WET HE LICKED HIS LIPS.
"FUFU... FUFUFU..."
THE SHARK GAVE AN OMINOUS CHUCKLE, AND THEN OF ALL THINGS HE JUMPED RIGHT AT THE RABBIT!
"IF WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THE WHITE RABBIT OF INABA, ONCE THE SHARK FIGURED OUT HE HAD BEEN TRICKED BY THE RABBIT, THE SHARK GOT MAD AND RIPPED THE RABBIT'S FUR OFF! SO FOR HUMANS... UMM, IT MEANS YOU GET YOUR CLOTHES STRIPPED OFF AND THEN VIOLATED!"
"KYAHH?! ALSO, ONIICHAN, AREN'T YOU BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL WAY TOO MUCH?!"
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THE RABBIT WAS INCHES AWAY FROM FALLING VICTIM TO A CARNIVOROUS BEAST! OH NO!
"STOP LUSTING AFTER YOUR OWN SISTER! YOU DAMN PERVERT!"
BUT THERE WAS NOBODY MORE ADEPT THAN THIS RABBIT AT DEALING WITH HER BROTHER WHEN HE LOST HIS MIND LIKE THIS, SO SHE VIOLENTLY CRUSHED BOTH HIS BODY AND MIND IN ONE FELL SWOOP.
"UUU... UGH... WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS...?"
PITIFULLY DESERTED, THE SHARK BEGAN SOBBING FAT, UGLY TEARS.
"AH, PAPARIN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING OVER THERE?"
"FUNYAA. EVEN IN PARALLEL WORLDS SENSEI IS TREATED PRETTY HORRIBLY, ISN'T HE?"
"HEY, YOU TWO, TRY A BIT HARDER TO ACT LIKE YOU'RE IN A FAIRY TALE, OKAY?!"
A GROUP OF PASSING GODS STOPPED AND SENT THE SHARK CURIOUS LOOKS.

THE SHARK THOUGHT THAT MAYBE THESE GODS WOULD HAVE SOME MEDICINE THAT COULD HEAL HIS WOUNDS.

"UWAH, THAT'S SO PATHETIC." "KYAHAHA!" "GROSS~~!" THE GODS AMUSED THEMSELVES LOOKING AT THIS CREATURE AND LAUGHING LIKE HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS WHO HAD JUST FOUND SOME ANIMAL CLOSE TO DEATH, BUT THE SHARK GAZED HOPEFULLY UP AT THESE GODS.

"HELLO! COULD YOU LISTEN TO MY STORY? IT MUST BE FATE TO MEET GODS ON THIS ROAD HERE! BUT WHAT HAPPENED WAS-"

"HM, IT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT."

GOD A (TSURUGI) DIDN'T SEEM TO HAVE ANY INTENTION OF LISTENING TO THE SHARK'S STORY. SHE KICKED THE SHARK AND PAINFULLY GROUND HER FOOT INTO THE SHARK'S BACK.

"YOU LOST ANY CHANCE TO ARGUE THE MINUTE YOU STARTED FEELING DIRTY THINGS FOR YOUR REAL LITTLE SISTER. DON'T YOU UNDERTAND THAT, MR. SHARK?"

TSURUGI LECTURED THE SHARK WITH FITTING WORDS FOR A FAIRY TALE.


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"FUNYAA. ALSO, IT'S RIDICULOUS THAT A FISH WOULD DARE TO TRY TO SPEAK WITH GODS ON EQUAL TERMS. HOW DISGUSTING. YOU PROBABLY WANT MEDICINE, BUT FOR THE LIKES OF YOU THIS IS MORE FITTING!"

FOR NO REAL REASON, GOD B (KAGAMI) WAVED A WHIP AROUND, AND GOD C (TAMA) SEEMED TO FIND THIS SO FUN THAT SHE ALSO DECIDED TO JOIN IN. THEY TERRORIZED MY BROTHER, AND WITH THE ELDEST SISTER JOINING IN THE SHARK WAS SOON

"AHH, THAT FELT NICE."

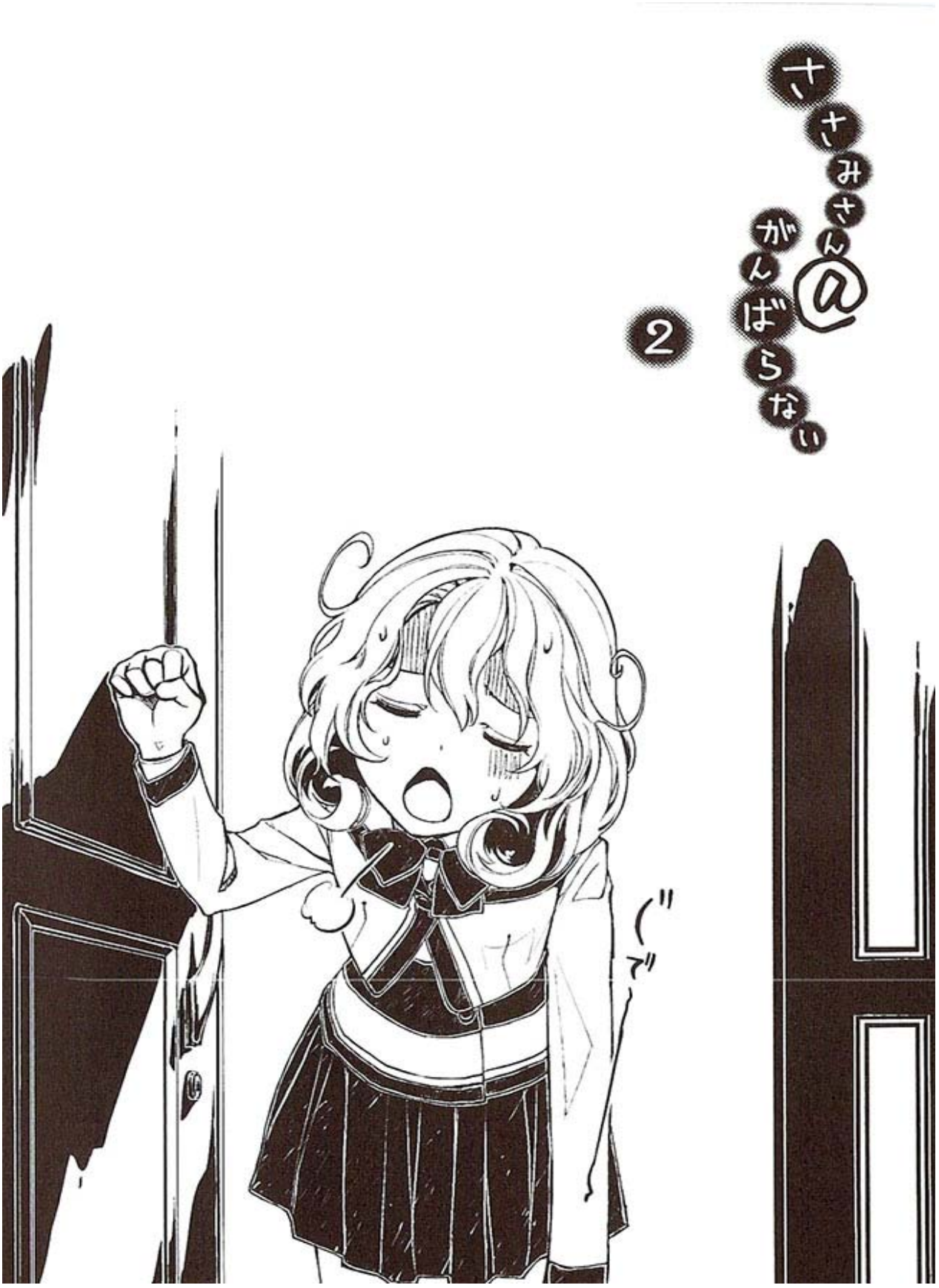
WITHOUT FEELING A SINGLE SENSE OF GUILT THAT THEY HAD COMPLETELY GONE OFF TRACK OF THE ORIGINAL STORY, THE GODS LEFT THE SCENE.

LEFT BEHIND BY HIMSELF, THE SHARK WAS ON THE BRINK OF DEATH, WHEN HE WAS BATHED IN A WARM LIGHT AND A GENTLE VOICE REVERBERATED THROUGH THE AIR.

"MR. SHARK, MR. SHARK. THERE'S NO REASON TO BE SAD. I'LL GIVE YOU SOME MEDICINE."

THIS KINDHEARTED GOD APPEARED AT LAST, AND HEALED ALL OF THE SHARK'S WOUNDS.


THE SHARK WAS SO MOVED BY THIS GOD NAMED SASAMI-SAN'S CHARITY THAT HE BROKE OUT INTO TEARS.
"AHH, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME SOMEONE HAS BEEN SO KIND TO ME. TO REPAY THAT KINDNESS, I'LL SPEND MY ENTIRE LIFE DEDICATING MYSELF TO THIS BEAUTIFUL, KIND SASAMI-SAN, AND I SWEAR TO FOREVER ATTEND TO HER EVERY NEE...
"SASAMISAAAN~~. IT'S MORNING. ARE YOU READY FOR SCHOOL YET~~?"
KYAHH!
DON'T BARGE INTO MY ROOM SO SUDDENLY LIKE THAT! ONIICHAN, YOU DAMN PERVERT!!


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PART 1: Hoderi and Hoori[1]

Chapter 1: Sasami Watch Project

I found a suspicious DVD in my brother's room.

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Allow me to explain the situation.

A lot of things happened, and I finally started going to school after having been confined to my room as a hikikomori[2] for a long time. But it's not like I could just adapt to normal society that easily, and just going to class and returning home took everything out of me. At the end of the day I was always reduced to a state of semi-unconsciousness, teetering back and forth in exhaustion.

"I… just can't… try hard anymore…"

Today was especially bad, and a heavy weariness filled every corner of my body. I didn't even want to try to remember what had gotten me so tired.

I couldn't even muster up the strength to go up the stairs to my room, and just desperately wanted a place to collapse and sleep. So, I found myself standing in front of my brother's room, which was on the first floor.

"Oniichan~~."

I knocked and called out to my brother.

[1] Two brothers in Japanese Myth. The actual myth is a bit too long to put in a footnote, but if you are interested you can read about it here.

[2] I'm only going to footnote this once per volume. A hikikomori is a shut-in, someone who doesn't leave their room for anything. In Japan it is generally considered a social disease.

There was no response.

My brother loved me, so if he was in the room he would have definitely shouted out “What do you need from me, Sasami-san?! I should strip, yes?!” and then come bounding out of the room while taking off his clothes.

“I guess he’s still not back…”

Feeling a bit disappointed, I opened the door to his room.

It was fairly dark inside.

I turned on the lights, and my brother’s plain room filled my vision.

It was an adult’s room with absolutely nothing remarkable about it.

There wasn’t even anything to play around with, so to a kid like me this room was pretty boring.

He didn’t even have a TV… what exactly did he do in his free time?

Yawnnnn…

But enough about that incomprehensible brother of mine. I lay down on top of his soft bed.

For now, I really didn’t want to move anymore.

Everything now was so fun and exciting, and every day was filled with new experiences.

But living as a normal human was really pretty tiring.

“Oniichan…”

Burying my head into my pillow made it almost feel like I was being hugged by my brother.

His scent was there too.

I flapped my feet up and down as I lay there, as if I was sucking up some kind of energy from the space around me. Suddenly, I noticed something.

There was something next to the laptop computer on my brother’s desk.

At a glance, it seemed like a suspicious-looking DVD.

“…?!”

I jumped a bit and got off the bed, then I walked towards the desk.

My heart pounded as I picked up that DVD and set it at eye level.

“What the hell is this…?”

I go to my brother’s room a lot, so I pretty much know where everything is placed.

But I’d never seen this DVD before.

It didn’t look like a DVD he had bought from a store, and there wasn’t a label either.

It seemed more like a DVD he had burned himself or something.

All I saw were some messy letters scribbled on the front in what looked like permanent marker.

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Top Secret

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"……?"

Suspicious…

I just couldn't stop thinking about what was on this DVD, so I went over and locked the door and booted up my brother's laptop.

This laptop should be able to read DVDs…

"Don't tell me…"

I sat myself down in the computer chair, uneasily teasing my hair with a finger as I mumbled to myself.

"That's just… but… well, oniichan is an adult, so I guess there's no helping it. But what kind of porn is this…?"

I had already made up my mind about what was on that DVD.

"But, oniichan, that idiot… to think he's interested in other girls… even though he's supposed to love only me… what kind of girl is he lusting after here…?"

I felt myself getting increasingly annoyed.

My brother is an adult, so it's not like it was illegal for him to go buy porn or make a porn DVD… but he's always going on and on about "Sasami-san, I love you~~~" so it was just unacceptable that he would have feelings for anyone else.

This was pure infidelity.

So, it was obvious that I had the right to investigate what kind of porn DVD he bought, and find out whether he had watched it already or not.

Yup, that was true. I nodded, and inserted the DVD into the laptop.

A new window meant for displaying a video popped up on the laptop screen.

“Hm…?”

I was perplexed.

There should have been a video or something playing in that window… but all I saw was a black screen with a few lines of noise running across it. I couldn’t make any sense out of it.

“Huh…?”

I couldn’t help but feel uneasy at the sight of this gloomy screen, which was far from the erotic image I had been expecting.

Seconds passed, and then a minute… I just sat there stiff, without moving.

Suddenly, the noise disappeared.

Little swirls began to appear on the black display, almost as if drops of ink were landing on the screen. And then, in the middle of the screen…

Without a sound, words appeared in a cold-looking font.

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Sasami Watch Project.

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"……?"

I cocked my head to the side at the sight of those words that just showed up with absolutely no context.

"What is this…? Sasami? Is it talking about me?"

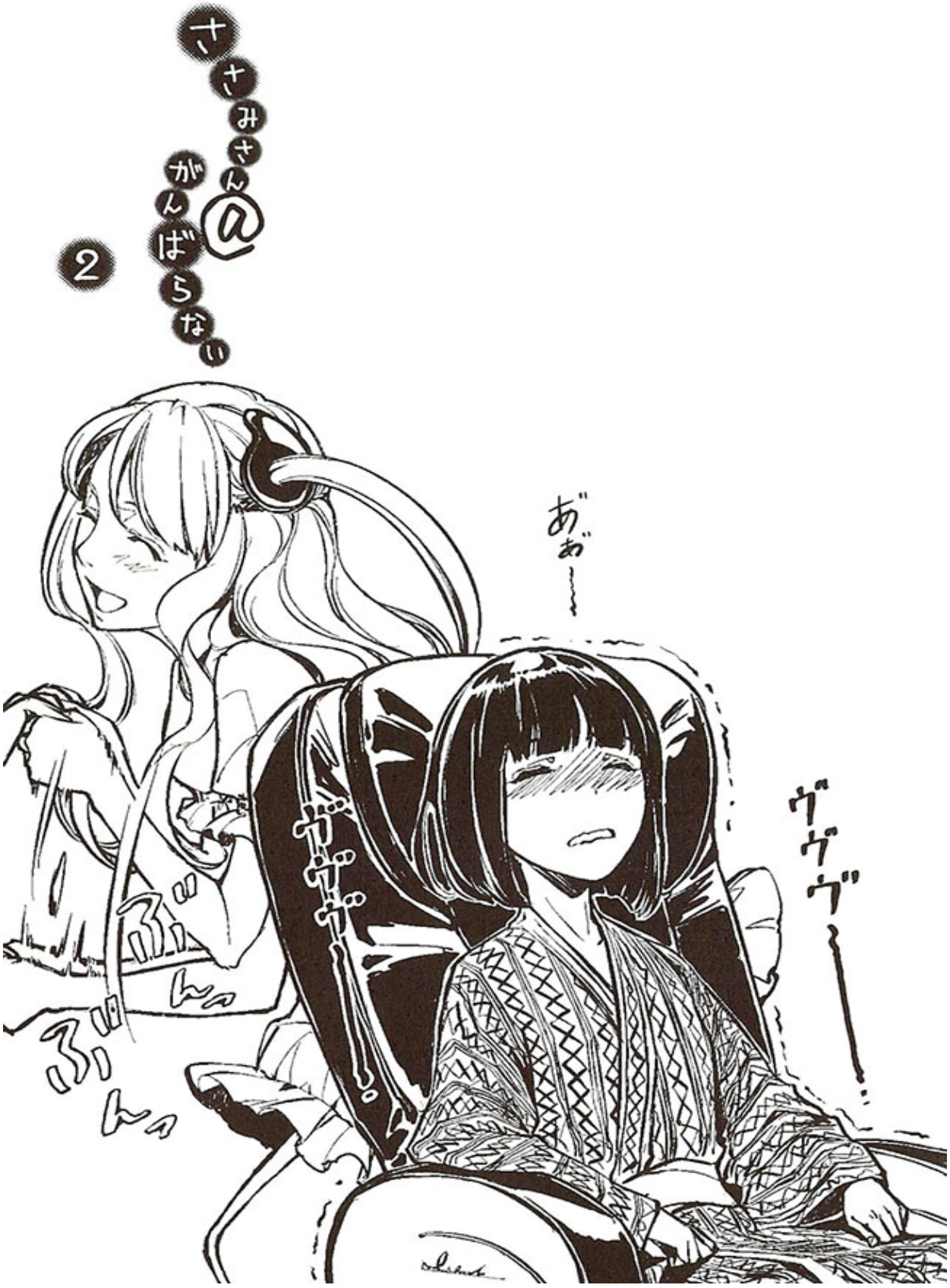
My name is Tsukuyomi Sasami.

I felt my heart jump.

For some reason, I had a deathly bad feeling about this.

I really shouldn't watch this any further.

But even as my instincts were sending out all kinds of alarms, I could no longer pretend to not watch and get away from the computer. All I could do was gulp and stare at the screen…


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Chapter 2: My First Errand

Sasami Watch Project.

For a while, those ominous words remained shining on the screen… but as I stared at them in blank amazement, I saw noise once again run across the computer window, after which a nonsense pattern of magenta, cyan, and yellow appeared scattered on the screen, almost as if some light somewhere had been reflected irregularly.

Then, suddenly, almost as if we were exiting some kind of tunnel…

A scene that I could make sense of finally appeared on the display.

Swsh, swsh… I could hear the sounds of air flowing past the camera, and then I saw what looked like a very crudely made home video, given how much shaking the camera was doing.

“This is…?”

I was at a loss for words.

In the exact center of the screen was someone I recognized.

”H-Hello. This is Yagami Tsurugi...”

The eldest Yagami Sister, Yagami Tsurugi, shyly blushed on screen.

As always, it was difficult to imagine that this small girl could be a teacher. She was plopped down in a pipe chair.

There was nothing behind her except a bare concrete wall, so I couldn’t tell where she was.

I was a bit flustered at seeing someone I knew on screen… but then Tsurugi whispered in a nervous voice.

”P-Please take care of me today…”

What the hell was up with her?

She could say “die!” and “sh*t” like it was the most natural thing in the world, but this Tsurugi on screen was so apprehensive and reserved that I could’ve sworn it was a different person. Actually, it made her kind of cute.

Her hands fidgeted around as they lay on top of her lap, clasped together.

”Hm? My age? Ehehe…”

It sounded like someone was asking her questions. Tsurugi gave a small nod and blushed straight to her ears.

”I-I’m… eighteen…”

Liar!

You’re thirty-one!

Actually, to be precise, it’s more like you’ve lived since the beginning of time!

”I’m not lying~~~. I’m not a kid. Come on, believe meeee~~.”

Tears welled up in Tsurugi’s eyes as she put her hand on her white lab coat and speedily stripped it off.

What the hell was she doing?!

“Ehehe, I-I know my breasts aren’t really that big, but… I still reaaaally like doing sexy things, and my first time was…”

Getting up to that ridiculous point, Tsurugi suddenly lifted her face up in surprise.

”Huh?! You’ve started filming already?! Tell me that sooner, dammit!”

Tsurugi returned to her usual tone and sat up straight in her chair.

”Ummm, alright, we’re going to put the ‘Make-Believe Adult Video Shoot’ segment on hold and get back on topic now! Tch, I was going to go as far as pushing Tsukuyomi to the ground for the sake of reality too...”

Why the hell do you always want to go around doing perverted things…?

”Ahem.”

Tsurugi cleared her throat and began to speak seriously.

“Umm… I’m Yagami Tsurugi, the person in charge of this Sasami Watch Project… hey, shut up! I want this thing to sound nice and proper! Stop grumbling and just take the damn video, Tsukuyomi!”

Tsurugi threw something, and the camera shook a bit.

Ahh, so my brother was the cameraman…

”This Sasami Watch Project – SWP for short – was made because we want to support Sasami, who after the recent big mess has finally inserted herself back into society.”

Huh? Me?

”She’s realized that the power of the Supreme God rests within her, and she’s trying to live a normal life while she controls her overwhelmingly high divinity and power. This was her decision, so we should want to support her with that. Rather, to support her with that is the reason we exist.”

I was honestly happy at hearing that.

The three Yagami Sisters.

They were my neighbors, friends, and divine companions who protected my everyday way of life.

”Although, there are a few problems with this.”

Tsurugi’s voice went quiet as she raised a finger.

”Sasami feels animosity towards her family, so she doesn’t feel as desperate as the Tsukuyomi clan did to keep the world a place convenient for humans. Some of the blame for this rests on us, since to humans we’re nothing but ‘irregularities,’ but Sasami has accepted us for who we are. And because of that, the gods have more freedom in the present world. In other words, it is now easier for irregularities to spring up.”

Well, yeah, that was true.

Making the world a place convenient for humans was unnatural in the first place, and as long as the Yagami Sisters were there then it might not be a big deal if the other gods had a bit more freedom… I probably thought that unconsciously.

And because I possessed the Supreme God’s power, the world bent itself according to my thoughts.

So the present world was just as Tsurugi had said: it was a place where irregularities could easily spring up.

”Unlike her family members who can protect themselves spiritually, even though we’re here protecting Sasami, it’s uncertain if she has enough power right now to resist and defend against irregularities. If an evil god comes around to try and steal the Supreme God’s power from Sasami, it’s not clear whether she’d be able to deal with that.”

Well, that was also true.

I had escaped from the Tsukuyomi clan when I was still in the middle of my training, and my spiritual powers were not invincible.

I had erected somewhat of a barrier around our house here, but if someone with high divinity tried to break in, that barrier wouldn’t stop them for even a second.

”That’s precisely why we have to test her… and make Sasami grow. Both in terms of her spiritual abilities, and as a person.”

Tsurugi meekly continued.

”We’ll put her through various trials and make her level up. The SWP is a plan to keep record of her attempts in video, and also for us to burst out laughing whenever she does something stupid.”

That was terrible…

I was an idiot for being a bit impressed earlier…

But, trials?

This was a DVD, so this had been pre-recorded and everything being shown had already happened. But I didn't really remember going through any kind of trial like that.

Hmm…?

Was I forgetting something…?

"Anyway, I'm proud to say that today is our first episode of SWP. For her first trial, we've already given Sasami a simple test! And my talented little sisters are following her and taping her every move!"

Tsurugi took out a cell phone and dialed some number.

"Hey, Camera Two… Kagami! Let us know what's going on over there!"

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Static filled the screen for just a minute, and then the scene changed.

This DVD was probably made by editing together the videos from a bunch of different cameras.

Geez, they sure wasted a lot of time on this…

"Okay."

A vacant-sounding voice came out from the video.

At the same time, a huge eyeball was shown on the screen.

I could clearly see the huge pupil and hair-thin veins. It was an insanely gruesome sight.

”Way too close! I can’t see anything but your eye! Move farther away from the camera!”

I could hear Tsurugi yelling.

At the same time, a small window appeared on the bottom of the screen, displaying Tsurugi and the concrete wall background I had been looking at before.

Ahh, so I could see both scenes at the same time.

Tsurugi had fallen off her pipe chair from surprise, but Camera Two – I guess that was the second camera they had – didn’t seem too perturbed by Tsurugi’s shouting and slowly began to move.

The camera backed away from the eyeball until I could see Yagami Kagami normally displayed on screen.

She was a doll-like girl, who was also wearing a Konohana Sakuya Academy uniform.

She tottered a bit and rubbed her eyes. It was clear she was sleepy.

”Funyaa.”

Kagami let out a strange-sounding yawn and began to grumble.

”It’s hard for me to film myself… in any case, this is Yagami Kagami, and I’ll be taking care of Camera Two. Nice to meet you.”

Kagami lightly bowed her head.

Her hair waved a bit in the wind. She was probably outside.

”Right now, I am behind Sasami-san… I am on her tail, around thirty meters separated from her. Can you see her?”

The scene violently shook and went away from Kagami.

I recognized the place as the shopping mall near our school.

It was probably after school… I could see a couple of people wearing Konohana Sakuya Academy uniforms sticking out from the crowd, probably on their way home for the day.

There were also plenty of people buying or selling things, and people taking their dogs out for walks.

There was one lone girl there, walking beside one of those many colorful shops. It looked like a Western clothing shop.

”That is Sasami-san.”

Ahh, hmm… I thought it was just another cute girl, but that was me!

But, hmm… now that I’m in this video, this thing had to be filmed in the past, right? But I really couldn’t remember any of this ever happening…

When in the world did they tape this?

”It doesn’t seem like she’s noticed me. There are a lot of students around, so I don’t stand out in my uniform. It’s also good that my sense of presence is usually very weak.”

Geez, what a depressing thing to say…

”I also prepared my stealth functions just in case… but that function tires me out a bit, so I won’t activate it until it really seems I’m about to be found out.”

You could say Kagami was some kind of spiritual robot or something, and she was equipped with a lot of functions, some of which even she wasn’t aware of.

”To be honest, I am also really quite sleepy right now…”

Even though she seemed really sluggish, she still faithfully and precisely continued tailing me.

”This might be in bad taste, but I don’t mind. Ahh, I wonder if Sasami-san will do something so hilarious that I can laugh at her for a lifetime…”

This girl was awful too!

”Okay, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Tsurugi muttered, seeming fully satisfied, and then once again fiddled with her cell phone.

”Alright, Camera Three… Tama? How’s it going over there?”

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”… Huh?”

Staring at the small screen for Camera Three, Tsurugi was clearly startled.

”What the hell is this…?”

I didn't blame Tsurugi for looking confused, since this was an odd sight indeed.

The room looked a bit fake, almost as if it was made from paper mache and came straight out of an old sci-fi movie.

Everything was pointlessly gleaming and pale-colored. The image was also fuzzy, so it was difficult for me to tell what was going on.

The walls, floors, and ceiling were all smooth and made of an indeterminate material.

Tama was sitting down in the exact middle of that scene… on what seriously looked like a surgery table.

It was hard to imagine that someone with this beautiful of a body could be an elementary schooler. And as usual, she was just sparkling with energy.

She wore cute, child-like clothing, and a scarlet-colored jewel adorned her long hair.

Tama seemed to be talking to whoever it was who was holding the camera. **"Yeah! Tama, you know, she joined the Broadcast Club at school! And at lunch, at lunch, she plays music and tells everyone the news! But but, ehehe… Tama is too loud sometimes, and the principal, he has a weak heart, and…"** I really had no idea what she was talking about.

But… where exactly was Tama right now?

No matter how I looked at it, she couldn't have been in the neighborhood.

Had she wandered into a shady shop or something?

”H-Hey… Tama? Huh? The call won’t go through… just gotta use a small ‘alteration’ here… ugh, dammit, this is annoying! Where the hell is that idiot?! Hnnnnnnghhh….”

Tsurugi seemed to concentrate her attention on her cell phone, probably creating an alteration, until finally it seemed that her call was getting through and her voice was reaching Tama’s screen.

”Oi, Tama! Can you hear me?!”

”Ah! It’s the phone… hello~~! This is Tama!”

Tama gave an innocent smile and continued to talk with great energy.

”Howawawa… it’s Tsurugi-nee! Umm, Tama will introduce you… these are Tama’s new friends! Come over here, the two of you! Hurry hurry!”

Tama called out to whoever was handling the camera, but then she cocked her head to the side.

”Eh? Are you sure? You should become friends with Tsurugi-nee too…”

After she said that, the screen shook violently. I think the camera had been passed back to Tama.

For just a second, I could have sworn I saw some strange, silver-colored, slippery-looking things… but I didn’t really want to think about it too much.

Tama, on the other hand, didn’t seem the least bit wary about what was going on around her as she handled the camera with an unsteady hand.

”Well, okay then! Also, umm, Tama… Tama is working right now! She has to go follow Mamarin!”

Mamarin was me, by the way.

Tama pushed her cell phone to her ear and waved her hand back and forth.

“They say they’ll be sure to take Tama back to where she was! Umm, actually… where is Tama right now? Umm, there was this light in the sky, and then Tama woke up in this room! And then, and then, these *short, silver people with big eyes* told Tama ‘wE wOUld lIKe tO iNVestigate iNTelligent lIFe on eARth’ or something like that!”

”Ah, okay… Tama, from now on try not to just randomly go off with strangers, alright? If what I’m thinking is right, then once you’re abducted by those people there’s a good chance they’ll open your belly and implant some random metal thing or something…”

”Howawa…?”

Tama didn’t seem to have the slightest clue of what Tsurugi was talking about. She had so little life experience that she wasn’t aware she was having a Close Encounter of the Third Kind. Oblivious, she just threw her hands up with abandon.

”Anyway, Tama is going back to work right away! Tama will do her best!”

”Ah, okay…”

Tsurugi seemed at a bit of a loss and just gave a standard response, prompting my brother to speak up.

”Umm, Tsurugi-sensei…”

”Not a word. Honestly, all these gods and whatnot are already enough to drive me to the brink of sanity, so I don’t need more random stuff to deal with. Ignore it. Don’t even think about it.”

@@@@@@

After finishing her call with Tama, Tsurugi let out a sigh.

”Well, whatever… Tama will probably be able to get herself back safely no matter what happens. I guess we can just leave Sasami-san to Kagami. Hey, Kagami~? How’s it going over there~?”

”Funyaa.”

I heard a relaxed-sounding voice, and then a cute, white rabbit filled the screen.

It was a fluffy rabbit, the mere sight of which made you want to pet it.

”Uwah?! Why is Kagami’s screen so soothing all of a sudden?!”

I had been so focused on Tama and Tsurugi that I wasn’t paying attention to what Kagami was filming… but how was she suddenly filming a rabbit?!

The rabbit sniffed to and fro and then leaned its face into the camera.

Its long, thin ears waved back and forth.

”Do you like rabbits?”

”Eh? Ah, yes!”

”You can pet it if you want~~.”

”R-Really?! It’s okay?!”

I heard a kind female voice, and then Kagami's unusually emotional response.

Kagami then reached out to pet the rabbit; I saw her white fingertip on screen while the screen wobbled back and forth drunkenly.

"Funyaa…"

Her nervous finger reached out and touched the rabbit on its cheek.

The rabbit seemed to take a liking to Kagami and leaned in to Kagami's touch.

Fluff fluff. Pet pet.

"Funyaa…~~"

"Oh my, this one likes you quite a lot. Do you like animals?"

"Yes, I love them. *I hate humans though.*"

After listening to this peaceful (?) conversation, Tsurugi blew her top.

"Dammit! Kagami! What the hell are you doing?!"

"Ah, neesan… umm, do you think we can get a pet rabbit?"

"I'll think about it, but keep on track, dammit! What happened to Sasami?!"

"Ah… I suddenly felt myself drawn to this pet shop here, so…"

Kagami stood up, causing the screen to shake violently.

But the camera once again pointed at the rabbit, almost as if Kagami really didn't want to leave.

The rabbit's big, round eyes seemed to tear up as it stared back at us.

"Funyaa…"

Kagami sat down again and poked the rabbit's small paw with her finger.

"I'm sorry. I have work to do so I have to leave… is it all right if I come back later?"

"Of course~. Please come anytime."

A girl wearing an apron, who I guessed was the person working at the pet shop, waved at Kagami.

"Bye bye, Usa-chan…"[1]

Kagami spoke in the kindest voice I've ever heard from her, and in response the rabbit's ears waved.

"Usa-chan…"

Kagami dragged her feet around the pet shop for a little bit longer, but then finally seemed to shake off her lingering attachment towards the rabbit and went back out into the town.

"This is quite bad…"

And then she seemed at a loss.

"I've completely lost sight of Sasami-san…"

[1] The Japanese word for rabbit is usagi, so this is a fairly typical Japanese pet name for a rabbit.

”Are you an idiot?! Tama’s pretty useless right now, so you’re the only one I can count on! Ugh, Sasami is pretty small so it’s easy to lose her in a crowd…”

Tsurugi is the last person in the world I wanted to be calling me small…

”Don’t worry. I have something like a GPS function installed.”

Kagami declared that confidently, probably trying to redeem herself.

”I can detect spiritual waves from a satellite signal and use it to determine where Sasami-san is right now… hmmm… well, it seems that she has gotten quite far away from us. She has moved all the way to the back side of the shopping mall. I’ll do my best to catch up to her…”

When she finished that sentence, the screen shook tremendously and turned completely white.

Boom!

I had no idea what was going on.

The screen twirled around and around with great force and I heard a loud reverberating roar. But then I could see the blue sky.

It seemed she was leaping from rooftop to rooftop.

From the camera image, I could tell we were even higher than the telephone poles.

But I could also feel myself getting a bit sick at this awful bouncing up and down of the camera.

”And… there we go.”

Kagami's voice coincided with a huge tremor on screen, and then everything finally fell still.

She was now in a completely different place.

There were a lot of confused, alarmed people around her making a fuss, along with an unbelievable crack running down the road.

"I have moved closer to Sasami-san's location."

Kagami sounded quite proud of herself, but Tsurugi was just nonplussed.

"Hey, you… don't move along the rooftops, dammit! You a ninja or something?! Those damn abilities of yours are surprisingly not a joke, so haven't I told you so many times that you shouldn't go jumping or running around like that?!"

"Tehehe."

"And don't think you can just get away with it by just going 'tehehe'! Aren't you cute?! Back there too, you're so emotionless usually but you were showing your moe moe side with that bunny rabbit! Just marry me already!"

"Neesan, calm down."

Kagami moved forward quietly, and stopped in front of a building.

"Sasami-san went into this shop. Shall I follow her inside?"

It was a simple drugstore, the kind you would find anywhere in any town.

@@@@@@

Drugstores were usually so similar that you could hardly tell the difference between one and the other, and this one was no exception.

There was a jumble of items lined up on the shelves, and the lighting was almost blindingly bright.

”Currently following Sasami-san.”

I heard Kagami’s voice from the screen. She was most likely hiding in the shadow of one of the shelves.

It was probably strange for a girl to be carrying a camera inside a store, so on screen I could see the shop employees and other customers giving her strange looks, but Kagami didn’t seem to pay that any mind.

”But… what exactly is Sasami-san doing in a drugstore?”

Kagami asked that question as she picked up and inspected a few easy-sleep products that she seemed interested in.

”It looks like she’s looking for something, but…”

Just as Kagami said, I was there in the video wearing my uniform and was looking all around the drugstore, picking up items here and there with a confused look on my face.

In the video, I had what looked like a memo clutched in one hand. It seemed like I was on an errand or something.

”Ahh, yeah, I sent her out to buy something.”

Tsurugi seemed a bit bored with just watching Kagami and responded somewhat restlessly.

”The goal of the SWP is to help Sasami grow. So you know, it’s like how the first quest you get in an RPG is always an item fetch quest, right? It might just be an errand, but it’s standard to do simple quests like that to gain experience and get used to the game.”

”RPGs… those are…”

My brother then went overboard.

”Once you get used to the game, you fight monsters and save the world, right…?!”

”That sounds pretty fun. Maybe if we get bored of this errand quest I’ll just use a random alteration and try that out.”

Tsurugi said that as if it was the most natural thing in the world, but I didn’t have any aspirations to save the world.

”Although, if anything really unnatural happens, then Sasami might get suspicious… if she finds out that this is all a quest for her to get some life experience then it’ll only be half as effective… so in the end, we really have to just give her these quests casually.”

”Well, if you think about it like that, then sending her out to buy something might be a fairly suitable quest.”

Kagami whispered, trying not to get caught tailing me.

”Sasami-san was a hikikomori, right? So she’s probably pretty lacking in common sense, and it’s possible even mundane things like going shopping might offer her some useful life experience. For me too, after neesan saved me from that evil human organization, she gave me a lot of various tasks, and I ended up learning from those to adapt to human society.”

”Oh? So like Sasami-san, Kagami-san also went out shopping?”

Kagami shook her head at my brother’s question.

”No, in my case the tasks were a bit more extreme. ‘Destroy this army of ghosts in thirty minutes! *If you fail the world is going to end!*’ There were a lot of tasks like that. Neesan was surprisingly ignorant of human society herself, so I ended up just being self-taught.”

”Fufufu, I was young back then too, after all. I had a bit too much fun with these tasks and got carried away, hehe~~. So I ended up making all these end-of-the-world crises… you know what they say. Lionesses will push their cute little cubs down off a cliff.”[2]

”Although, in this case, it feels more like after you threw the cub off the cliff you also threw a huge rock down just to finish the job. Because of all that, I became very used to fighting, but never really learned how to fit into human society.”

Kagami gave a sigh at her older sister’s cruel words and then gave some advice.

”Sasami-san may have the power of the Supreme God, but she’s just a normal girl. So please don’t think it’s a good idea to give her any tasks which involve violence.”

”That’s why I let her do something as simple as go shopping.”

”Although, it seems she can’t find what you asked her to get… neesan, exactly what did you tell her to buy?”

Kagami seemed a bit confused, but then something else happened.

[2] The implication being to toughen them up.

On screen, I was going back and forth from shelf to shelf, clearly looking for something. So one of the shop employees tried to be helpful and walked up to me with a bright smile.

”Are you looking for something?”

”……”

I jumped a bit on screen. Geez, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for myself…

I saw myself get red and start waving my hands suspiciously.

”U-Umm…”

I mumbled something unintelligible, and then showed the shop employee the memo I was holding onto.

I got the feeling that nowadays, even elementary schoolers had better communication skills than that.

”Hmm… let’s see here…”

The shop employee never lost his bright smile as he read what was written on the memo out loud.

-

”‘Happy family planning,’ a dozen. Is that correct?”[3]

-

[3] “Happy family planning” was a slogan that was often on vending machines which sold… well, just keep reading to find out.

Kagami almost fell flat on her face.

”What in the world are you trying to make a high school girl buy, neesan?!”

”Well, I also thought about asking her to buy tampons or anti-diarrheas or something… but I guess I got carried away again and wanted to go for something a bit more truly dirty. Hehe.”

Tsurugi chuckled, but then got angry right back at Kagami.

”Also, what’s wrong with it?! Eroticism is the spice of life! I’m sure our audience is hoping for stuff like this to happen too! Just think about it… a cute high school girl with her face all red asking for ‘happy family planning’… isn’t that just too moe?!”

”No, it’s just rather creepy…”

As Kagami sighed in exasperation, I watched the shop employee go back to the register and begin typing on his computer.

”Hmm, unfortunately we don’t have any products by that name…”

”Eh, really? My sensei told me that they should sell this at drug stores… I don’t know what kind of medicine it is though…”

”I’m also not too sure…”

The shop employee and I exchanged a few words.

”Actually…”

My brother seemed a bit puzzled, and asked an innocent question.

”What exactly is ‘happy family planning’?”

”Eh?! You don’t know?!”

Tsurugi was taken aback, and Kagami began to whisper.

”Neesan, this is the sad truth… but the younger generation doesn’t really call them that anymore. I’m sorry, but it seems your attempt at sexual harassment has misfired.”

”I-Impossible! Dammit, so this is what they call the ‘generation gap’?! In the past, just saying the phrase ‘happy family planning’ was enough to get people to burst out laughing! What the hell do young people call those things then?!”

”Who knows? I’ve yet to encounter a situation where those things were necessary.”

”Dammit! To think that Yagami Tsurugi could fail at sexual harassment! I’ll remember this mistake for the rest of my life!”

”This is the first time I’ve seen neesan so frustrated.”

”So what exactly is ‘happy family planning’?”

”This.”

In response to my brother’s obvious question, Tsurugi took out a square, pink thing and displayed it in the small camera on screen.

Ohh… that was… well, it was one of *those* things.

You know… they’re made of rubber, and you use them for birth control…

Why the hell was Tsurugi walking around with one of those things?

Also, what kind of damn teacher asks a high school girl to buy those?!

”What kind of medicine is that?”

My brother still didn’t know what that thing was even though Tsurugi was showing it to him… honestly, if you ask me, he was the one who needed more common sense.

”Hmm, you really don’t know? Well, I guess that’s kind of expected from Tsukuyomi.”

Tsurugi gave him a sweet, sweet smile, and for some reason put her “happy family planning” in her mouth. She then began to slowly, sloooowly unzip her jersey…

”Well then, well then… you’re telling me to teach you through experience, right?! Very well, this cute Tsurugi-chan is gonna show you that she might look like a kid, but she’s much more than that~~!”

Tsurugi shouted random things as she leapt at my brother. I had no idea what she was doing to him, but the screen shook and the camera fell, until all I was looking at was a shot of the floor.

And then, I saw Tsurugi and my brother’s clothes being flung away…!

My brother shrieked, while Tsurugi’s excited voice rang through the room.

“What the hell?!”

I found myself suddenly banging on the screen.

“What the hell are you doing to my oniichan?!”

But this was a video, so no matter how much of the Supreme God’s power I had, I couldn’t really stop Tsurugi from doing what she was doing.

”W-Why are you stripping off my clothes, Tsurugi-sensei?”

”It’s embarrassing, so turn off the lights…”

”Eh? Ehh?”

”I’ll teach you… the secrets of a woman~~.”

So for a little while longer, all I heard was pointless, stupid talk like that coming from the computer screen.

Chapter 3: My First ****

As the banquet continued on screen, I heard a cold voice interject with an unpleasant tone.

”Neesan, I would appreciate it if you stopped being an idiot and would tell me what to do next… also, sensei, please resist a bit more. That’s why neesan tries to take advantage of you so often. Please keep your libidos in check.”

As the clock ticked on and on, Kagami’s movements became more sluggish and she began swaying from side to side as she walked (meaning, she was getting sleepier).

The screen was also swaying with her.

”It seems Sasami-san is heading towards her next purchase. Ah, she’s gone into a hundred-yen shop.”

Just as she said, I saw the me on-screen walk into one of the many hundred-yen shops in town.

It was a cozy little shop that had some cheap-looking items lined up on display in front of the store.

”What should I do? The shop seems quite cramped, so if I go inside the store there is a chance we will run into each other. Should I wait outside the shop? Or should I activate this stealth function thing I have and follow her in?”

”Hmmm…”

After draping just her white lab coat over her naked body, Tsurugi sat down in her chair and gazed at the screen.

”But… what is Sasami doing in a hundred-yen shop?”

”Oh? It wasn’t because neesan told her to?”

Kagami cocked her head to the side as she hid in the shadow of a telephone pole, eliciting some weird looks from the people walking past her.

”I really was under the impression that she went into this shop to look for the next item on her list of things to buy…”

”Well, it’s surprising how much stuff you can find in a hundred-yen shop, but I’m positive she won’t be able to find what I asked her to buy in there…”

Tsurugi seemed at a loss.

”Ah, by the way, after that piece of happy family planning, Sasami only has to buy one more thing to finish this ‘shopping quest,’ so with that in mind...”

”After all, there’s only so much time to go shopping after school.”

Kagami let out a yawn.

”Funyaa… I’m very sleepy. I want to go home and just crawl up under a futon… oh?”

As Kagami muttered complaints, she saw me coming out of the hundred-yen shop.

On-screen, I began walking off somewhere, carrying a plastic bag in my hand that I definitely did nothave before.

”Seems like she bought something.”

Kagami squinted.

”Hmm… what did she buy exactly? It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with what neesan asked her to buy, so maybe she made a personal purchase? Shall I use my x-ray vision capabilities to see what’s in that bag?”

”You had that capability?! Okay, do it right now! And then, while you’re at it, also give us a detailed account of what it looks like underneath Sasami’s clothes!”

”I thought neesan would say something like that… that’s why I had kept this ability a secret until now…”

Kagami covered her mouth, as if she had just said something careless.

”Hmm, let’s see… what’s in there…? Sunglasses? And a knitted cap… and also a jersey? A windbreaker? You sure can find all sorts of things in these hundred-yen shops lately… but I really think you should be buying clothing at a normal store…”

”So, what color are they?! What color are they?! Nobody in the audience cares about that plastic bag at all! Come on, tell us right now! What color?!”

”Stop being so annoying, neesan. The color of Sasami-san’s panties is completely irrelevant.”

”Well, I want to know the color of her panties too, but I’m actually talking about her nipp-“

”I’m reporting you to the police.”

Kagami responded coolly as Tsurugi’s head got more and more stuck in the gutter. But then, Kagami became suspicious.

”This isn’t the time to be fooling around. Sasami-san is… oh?”

Looking at the screen, I saw that I had stopped in front of a building and was now looking all around myself.

This neighborhood was pretty close to our school, but because I wasn’t used to it yet I was a bit nervous.

The building I was standing in front of was a family-oriented public bathhouse. I stood there for a while, reading the instructions posted out front.

”A bathhouse? Why? She could just take a bath at home.”

”Perhaps she doesn’t want to have to worry about Tsukuyomi peeking in on her.”

”Impossible! I never peek! We always take baths together!”

”Eh? W-What did you just-“

Kagami seemed a bit shaken by what my brother had said, but then saw that I had gone into the bathhouse. She hurriedly followed me.

“Ugh, so much to do today… I’ll begin tailing her.”

”Here it comes~~!! \(^o^)/ !! Go Kagami! Go go go!! Go into the women’s bath, a place all men have dreamed of. Take your camera and fill it with wondrous things! And then, history will move!”[1]

[1] A direct reference to a documentary TV program, “sono toki rekishi ga ugoita!” which literally translates to “at that time, history moved.”

”The only thing that will move is the police. Also, neesan, why are you getting so excited? You can just walk normally into a women’s bath.”

”Seeing it in real life and seeing it on camera is completely different! Don’t you understand?! Haven’t you heard about guys who have girlfriends but still play eroge?! It’s the same as… wait, no, that’s not what I wanted to tell you! Sexual desire, you see, is-“

“Ah, sorry, I wasn’t really listening… one ticket for a high school girl, please.”

Kagami ignored Tsurugi as Tsurugi just railed on and on. It seemed Kagami was buying a ticket for the bath.

She was probably hiding the camera while in front of the ticket vendor, as the screen was pitch-dark.

”Now that I think about it…”

Suddenly, the screen became crystal clear.

”I can use an alteration to hide the camera like this. The humans don’t have much divinity, so they shouldn’t notice the camera. Although, this does feel vaguely criminal…”

It was a relatively large-scale bathhouse.

A traditional Japanese-style hallway connected to various rest facilities, in which you could go to fancy-looking restaurants, take a bath in a hot spring, or get a massage. There were people lounging around, still hot and steaming from the bath.

I could see myself on screen heading resolutely for the bath area, and Kagami followed me.

”Maybe I should take a bath while I’m here… of course, I’ll be turning the camera off.”

”What’s with that utter lack of imagination?! Be more passionate, dammit! There are all these viewers who are plastered to the TV screen waiting for the steamy bath scene, and you’re gonna betray all of them?! I’ve seen this happening a lot on TV lately! Playing around with people’s libidos like that!!”

”What in the world are you talking about? Hmm, Sasami-san is…”

Kagami pointed the camera in various directions.

The screen panned around randomly for a while, but soon found me in the bathing area.

I had my hand on my uniform, and was just about to take it off.

I untied the ribbon, took off my jacket, and began to unbutton my shirt underneath.

My hair swayed heavily back and forth, and my bare shoulder came into view…

@@@@@@

”And now time for a commercial break.”

The screen went dark, and then suddenly displayed a huge close-up of my brother.

For some reason, his face was pixilated, so you couldn’t see what he looked like.

Tsurugi was probably expecting something much more obscene. I heard the sound of her falling off her chair.

”Hey hey hey, what the hell are you doing?! You’re not the one I want! Show me Sasami, dammit, Sasami! Hey! Wait! Tsukuyomi, you’re over here, aren’t you?! So what the hell is this on the screen?! Why is this ugly close-up of your face over there on Camera Two?!”

”Fufu… fufufu… I’m the brother, after all! So I prepared this dummy video for times when Sasami-san’s privacy was about to get horribly invaded. I modified the camera so that at my signal, the screen would change to this video!”

”You betrayed me! You bastard, you betrayed me!”

Tsurugi was angrier than I had ever seen her, but whatever.

”Do not worry, Tsurugi-sensei. I’m not boorish enough to forget the tenets of good taste… I said it’s a dummy video, but I’m sure Tsurugi-sensei will soon see it’s all she could’ve hoped for and that she’ll treasure it forever…”

Tsurugi probably started hitting my brother at that point, because all I could hear was him making gross sounds of “Dogoo~~!”, “Bokiii~~!” and “Myaa~~!” as he gave the camera a bold laugh.

As the two of them screwed around, the screen changed again.

The pixelated photo of my brother gave way to a scene somewhat obscured by noise and static.

It was a dim scene and… wait, that was definitely our house.

The only light I could see on screen came from the moon and stars shining in from outside the window… it must have been the middle of the night.

I could make out the outline of the stairs, looking like black ink running across parchment, and I heard the sounds of someone wearing socks creaking up those stairs.

That someone soon reached the top of the stairs, went down the hall, and then arrived in front of my door.

There was light spilling out from the crack in the door.

It was clearly pretty late, but I usually slept late too.

”It was a quiet, winter’s night, with the moon’s light shining dazzlingly bright overhead.”

I heard my brother’s voice narrating the scene.

Ugh, he was so annoying.

”That day, after finishing the housework and my preparations for the next day’s classes, I engrossed myself in the sport of ‘Sasami Watching,’ as is customary.”

I heard my brother’s breathing grow ragged as the camera dropped to just a few inches above the floor and slowly slid past the crack in the door.

What was probably happening was that my brother was now crouched low out in the hallway, and was forcing just his hand and the camera through the door crack and into my room.

The room was almost blindingly bright.

The whirl of electronics was audible. I was sitting there, surrounded by a number of powered-on computers and being illuminated by a rainbow of colors.

”Ahh, Sasami-san is cute today too… she’s so unguarded, and look at her rubbing her eyes like that… ahh, I want to go hug her! It’s pretty shameless to be peeking into your sister’s room, but I just can’t control these passionate desires of mine!”

Hey, oniichan?! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!

I had no idea… I really had no idea he was peeking at me like this!!

I can’t believe this! You damn hentai! Criminal!

Peeking at someone’s private time is the worst thing you can humanly do!

”… Hnn…”

At any rate, on screen… there was something off about me.

I was in my pajamas and my back was to the door.

For some reason, the computer right in front of my eyes was not on.

All I could see is my own absent-minded face being reflected on that dark computer screen.

”Sigh…”

I pushed a finger against my chest and looked downwards; there was a painful look on my face.

My breathing was uneven. I could see my shoulders rising and falling with an unnatural rhythm.

My pajamas were disheveled and began to slide down.

My shoulders, and then my naked back came into view, exposing my pure white skin to the camera.

”Hnn… ghh…”

I put my hands on my chest as my breaths came out slowly and sadly.

Kyahh?!?!

Kyaaaahh?!?!?!

What the hell was this?! This wasn’t right!!

”Uuu… ngg…”

I was going completely crazy, but the me on screen ignored the me in real life, still breathing those sultry, heavy breaths. I watched myself collapse onto my computer table and begin to shake.

”I don’t have many more of these charms that I took from our family shrine left… and I don’t have enough materials to make more… what am I going to do? Just keeping this thing in check with pure willpower is also going to be really tough…”

I chanted a short prayer, my voice still shaking a bit as if I was in pain.

”… Phew…”

I sounded relieved and lifted my head up, restoring my messed up pajamas to their original state.

At the same time, the me in real life finally understood what was going on.

The god of my physical body, which I had nicknamed “sarcoma,” was sealed within my chest.

This was a god that had been trained by my real family.

I was currently in possession of the Supreme God’s power, and this sarcoma would hijack my body in emergency situations or when I lost consciousness. It was under orders to ensure the safety of my body.

Earlier, this sarcoma had acted without permission and caused all sorts of problems, so I had sealed it with a charm and rendered it powerless.

But, considering I had run away from home, there was no longer a way for me to get new charms. I also didn’t have enough materials or the know-how to make more charms myself. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

At this rate, the sarcoma would revive, and then who knows what troubles that would bring.

”This thing is my own physical body, so it’s probably going to be hard to just cut off this sarcoma… and it looks like I won’t be able to seal him too much longer… what should I do?”

The me on screen was muttering to herself.

”Well, whatever. I’m tired, so I should sleep… hmm?”

I seemed to have sensed that something was off, and suddenly faced the camera with a serious expression on my face. In other words, I was now looking in the direction of my brother who was all hot and bothered and doing a Hindu squat on the other side of the door.

”……?”

Bam! I threw my door open with all my might and looked around.

But, right before that happened, my brother had retracted the camera and crawled up along the walls, finally sticking to the ceiling. He killed his own breathing to escape detection.

How the hell could he move like that? God, that was disgusting.

”Maybe… it was my imagination…”

I didn’t notice that my brother was right above me, and slowly walked back into my room.

I finally turned off the lights, and my house settled into a state of tranquility.

”Fufu… fufufu…”

Meanwhile, my brother stayed stuck to the walls, silently opening my door and slithering in. Once he got close enough, he pointed his camera at me.

”Fufufu… this is what Sasami-san looks like when she’s sleeping…!”

This fan service scene (for my brother, at least) continued for a while longer, displaying only a close-up of my angelic face while my brother continued his gross mumblings.

@@@@@@

That good-for-nothing “commercial” came to a close, and the scene cut to black.

Whether I had taken a bath or had done something else, enough time passed that I probably already finished whatever it was and had left the bathhouse by then.

”Too much time passed… it was the long-awaited bath scene too…”

Tsurugi knit her pretty eyebrows in displeasure, a look of frustration on her face.

”H-Huh? Did the camera break? Nothing’s showing on screen.”

Just as Tsurugi said, even though whatever Camera Two was filming should have been showing up on screen, all we saw was pitch black.

I couldn’t hear anything either… had Kagami turned the camera off?

”Maybe I should give her a call…”

Tsurugi took out her cell phone and pushed a few buttons with her small fingers.

RRRRRRRRRR (that’s the ringtone).

”…Hey, hello? Kagami? What’s wrong? Something happen?”

It seemed that Kagami had picked up on the other side. Tsurugi had a hint of worry in her voice.

Kagami probably chose that moment to turn the camera on again, and the display came back to life.

She was still in the bathhouse.

”Stop. Talking. You. Are. Very. Annoying.”

Kagami sounded three times as lazy and grumpy as she usually did.

The camera shook violently and was soon showing Kagami herself.

”Funyaa. I’m finally feeling comfortable, so can you please not interrupt?”

It seemed Kagami had also taken a bath. Her skin looked silky smooth from just getting out of the hot water, and she was now donning a yukata.[2]

Maybe she was trying to cool down, but she had a fan in one hand and a can of iced coffee by her side.

Gnnngnngnn…

I thought I heard a weird sound, but then I realized that Kagami was sitting in a massage chair.

She had settled into that position pretty well. She didn’t look in the least bit ready to move, and also seemed pretty tired… in fact, she looked to be half-asleep already.

”If you want to know about Sasami-san, then she didn’t even really take a bath… she just went off somewhere. Unfortunately, it seems that this is as far as I’ll get… ahhhh, this is wonderful… massages… makes you realize how ridiculous it is to be busy all the time…”

After she had taken a bath and fallen prey to the massage chair, Kagami seemed like she really couldn’t be bothered to follow me anymore.

Of course, Tsurugi wasn’t happy with this.

[2] Japanese traditional wear.

”You idiot! Don’t just take a break, chase after her! Are you not listening to your older sister?! Did you forget the debt you owe me?! Your older sister loved you so much that she had lots of fun scheming about fun baby-play that we could do! I could change your diapers, you could suck on a pacifier…”

”I have no idea what you’re talking about, you huge pervert.”

”Call me more names!!”

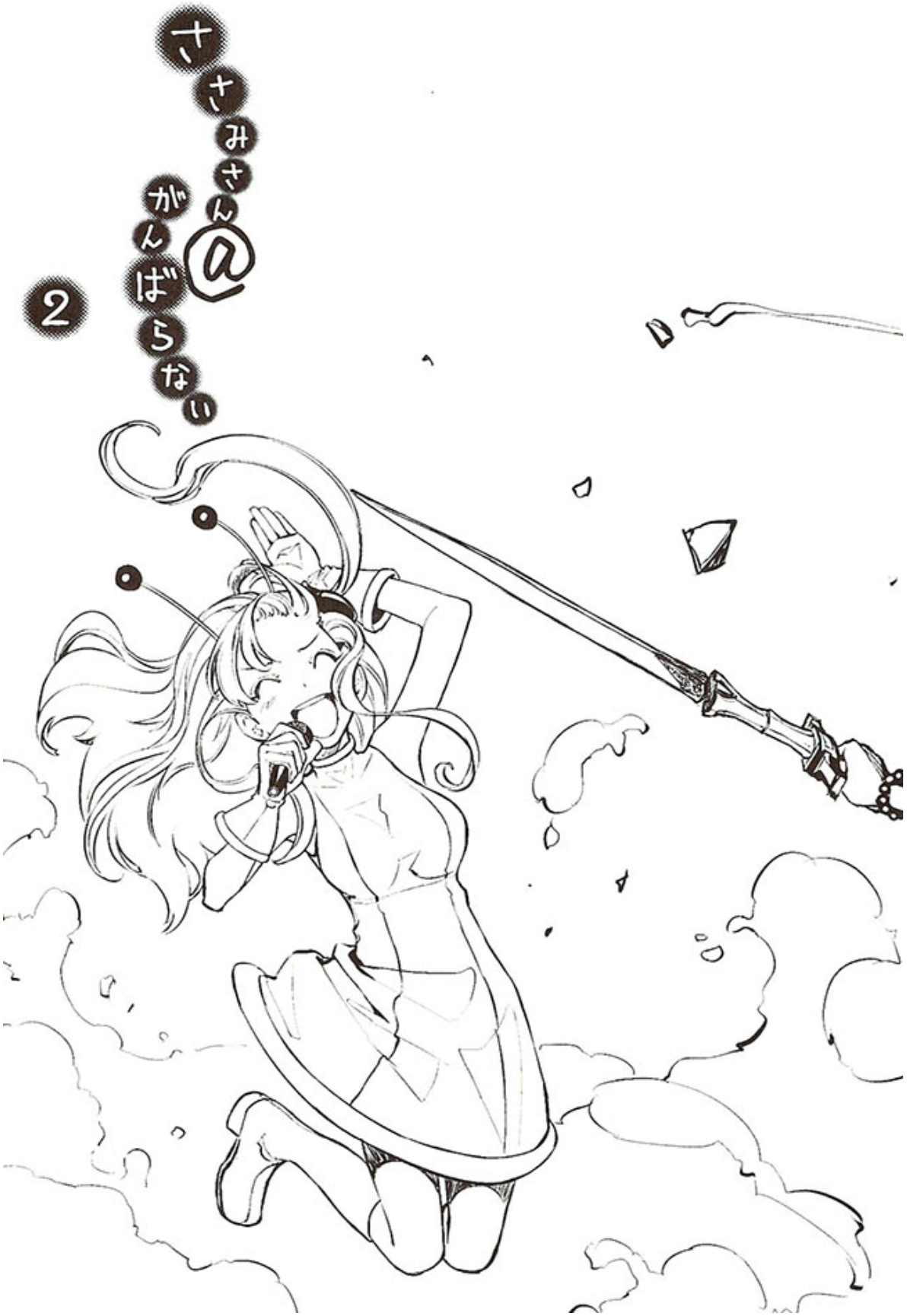
Tsurugi’s breathing grew erratic as she listened to the abuse her little sister was hurling at her, but she seemed to realize that she was wasting time and began to put on the clothes that she had stripped off and flung away earlier.

”I guess it can’t be helped… it was my fault for leaving this up to my little sisters! We’re going to go too, Tsukuyomi! She’s still in the neighborhood, so if we hurry we can catch her! Hey, Kagami, can you at least help out by navigating for us?”

”Zzzz… zzz…”

Kagami had fallen asleep.

Geez, she really had just gotten extremely tired of everything…


ささみさん@がんばらない
2



Chapter 4: The Moon and the Sun's Game of Tag (Front Half)

Static ran across the screen as the DVD played in fast-forward.

At that point, I realized how engrossed I was in this video. I leaned against the back of my chair, letting out a deep sigh.

What the hell was up with this DVD?

As far as I could tell, it just seemed like a normal video of Tsurugi and the others messing around.

But… something felt off to me.

Just watching this video caused a sense of unease to well up inside me.

The most frightening thing was…

The fact that I had no recollection whatsoever of any of the things that had been shown on screen.

I couldn't remember it… in fact, I had absolutely no idea about any of this.

I was the one being taped.

I was the star of this show.

And yet… when exactly had they filmed this?

Static continued to dance across the screen.

"……"

My head felt terribly heavy, and at the same time I began to feel strangely anxious.

I… needed…

Needed…

I needed to get away from here right now.

@@@@@@

”Okay, and here we are~~!”

The fast-forwarding continued for a while, but eventually stopped.

I could see that the sun had almost fully set in the distance behind the town, while Tsurugi was in the foreground. **”Yo,”** she said while making a peace sign.

”Kagami was sleeping, so we didn’t have any GPS getting here and didn’t know where Sasami had gone off to, but she’s definitely here! After all, this is the only place where you can buy the last item needed for this shopping quest she’s on!”

With overly flashy movements of the camera, Tsurugi showed us the shop she was referring to.

It was a small building, but it extended upwards quite a ways.

The word “Uzumenoana”[1] was painted in cute letters on a big sign, and right next to the lettering was a little girl who looked like a celestial maiden (she was drawn in anime style) striking a cute pose.

There weren’t many people around this place, although I could see plenty of sketchy-looking adult shops.

We were in an area at the corner of the shopping district, in a place where children rarely ventured.

Maybe a lot of these shops only opened when the sun had completely set, but at the moment, the area was pretty deserted.

”Over here, over here!”

Tsurugi happily charged into Uzumenoana, and my brother chased after her.

All the floors in this building belonged to this Uzumenoana shop, but each floor handled different merchandise.

1F: Comics, Light Novels, Game Walkthroughs

2F: Games (All-Ages PC Games, Family Games, Retro Games)

3F: Doujinshi etc. (Doujinshi, Adult Comics, Adult PC Games, Other Goods)[2]

4F: Event Booth (Event Hall, Office, etc.)

”Let’s go up to the third floor! Third floor!”

[1] May be a reference to Toranoana, a very large comics/doujins chain store in Japan.
[2] Not sure if I really need to footnote this, but doujinshi are books drawn by fans and sold at doujinshi events like Comic Market.

Tsurugi quickly went up the stairs.

This store had tried to pack so many items on each of its small floors that everything seemed even more cramped.

In our neighborhood, this was the only place you could get such genuine (?) articles, so they were doing pretty good business. There were plenty of customers, despite the shop being so out of the way.

”Umm, Tsurugi-sensei, it says here that you have to be over eighteen to go to the third floor…”

”Hm? Got a problem? You’re an adult and I’m an adult, right? Ah, you’re worried that I’m gonna get taken away by the police or something? I’m not a child, dammit! If I saw a student here, I’d be the one who went up to tease him! ‘Hey, watcha doin’ in a shop like this? Bought a porn book? Want to tell sensei which one you bought? Hmmm?’ Something like that!”

”No, it’s not that I’m worried about Tsurugi-sensei… but Sasami-san is underage, isn’t she? Sasami-san has common sense though, so I don’t think she’d go up to the third floor. If she’s in this shop, she’s probably on the first or second floor.”

”Tch tch tch.”

Tsurugi had already made it to the third floor, and she puffed out her chest proudly.

“The final boss of this shopping quest can only be found on the third floor of this town’s Uzumenoana! I even gave Sasami a memo telling her that, and drew a nice map for her too! She’s definitely on the third floor!”

”Please don’t ask someone underage to go buy something you can only get on an adult’s only floor…”

”But if I gave her an easy task then this’d all be so boring… this is for Sasami-san to gain experience after all! Also, you idiot! Keep your voice down! We don’t have anything as convenient as a ‘stealth mode’ or whatever, so Sasami’s gonna notice us if you keep on making a fuss! Especially since it’s cramped in here!”

Tsurugi was the one who was making a fuss, but my brother obediently fell into silence.

”Sasami-san… where is she? Oh?”

When it came to sniffing me out, my brother was the best in the world. He managed to find me right away, bending his neck at an impossible angle and staring off into an unknown direction.

”She’s there! It’s Sasami-san!”

I was standing right there.

”Tsukuyomi! Get over here! We’ll hide in this shadow!”

Tsurugi beckoned my brother over to the doujinshi bargain bins, where there were piles of old doujinshi stacked in cardboard boxes.

The me on screen didn’t seem to have noticed my brother and Tsurugi, but just kept on looking here and there with flushed cheeks.

”But…”

Tsurugi was puzzled.

”Why is Sasami wearing that bizarre outfit?”

It was exactly as she said.

I was wearing a matching jersey top and bottom that was completely out of fashion, a windbreaker, sunglasses, and a knitted cap on my head.

My hair was mostly hidden underneath the cap.

Even for me, that was a really sketchy-looking outfit.

”Ahah~~.”

Tsurugi seemed to have figured it out.

”This shop is near the school, right? So she doesn’t want to be found browsing around a place like this and then having rumors about her spread at school. So she’s wearing a disguise… Ahh, she bought this outfit at the hundred-yen store and probably changed at the bathhouse, didn’t she? And I thought all of that was completely random…”

Indeed, that seemed to be the case.

It seemed that going into a shop like this in my school uniform was too much for me to bear.

And so I probably thought about it and then settled on wearing a disguise.

”Well, I can’t say her disguise is very good… but her going through trial and error and showing a bit of creativity to gain experience is the ideal goal of the SWP! Now we just have to see if she can properly complete this quest or not…”

”Tsurugi-sensei, what exactly did you ask her to buy…?”

My brother’s voice was uneasy.

”Sasami-san’s body has a pretty small build, so even if she disguises herself she still clearly looks underage… I really don’t think she’ll be able to buy adult books.”

”Ah, I admit I did want to see Sasami-san go red in the face after she tries to buy a porn book and is told that she’s too young by the clerk… but I’d feel sorry for her too. So don’t worry! I asked her to buy something that minors can buy legally!”

As the two of them talked, the me on screen seemed to find what she was looking for and began to move.

About two-thirds of this floor sold adult manga and doujinshi, while the remaining third consisted of a rather sorry-looking selection of figures and other goods.

Almost everyone on this floor just made a beeline for the adult sections, so there weren’t too many people around me.

The register and stairs were right in the middle of a section that sold both adult and all-ages goods, and the bargain bins which my brother and Tsurugi were hiding behind were also right next to the register.

The staff member manning the register was staring at my brother suspiciously as my brother continued filming with his camera.

”… Umm… this one… right?”

The me on screen had stopped in front of a glass case that had been polished crystal clear.

There were a number of figures lined up in that case, sending forth waves of love that came right from the boundary between two and three dimensions.

”Umm…”

I was reading a memo.

”Let’s see… Umm, Ibuki-chan from the Yamato War Chronicles Taketake ☆ Ru~n? Ahh, there’s also an extra note here… ‘Don’t get her mixed up with Kumaso-chan! They look alike but that’s a different character! The tsundere-looking one with her eyes upturned a bit is Ibuki-chan, okay?!’ What the hell, as if I’m supposed to know! ‘Buy the limited edition one with removable armor! You can’t take the armor off in the normal version!’ Ugh, who the hell cares?!”

I was putting on a one-woman play on screen.

”Uwaah, something like this is thirty thousand yen…”

I was staring right at this Ibuki-chan or whatever.

It was a girl with a lot of skin showing, skin so pale that it almost hurt the eyes. And that was supposed to be armor? Looked more like a swimsuit…

She looked young, but her breasts were huge.

Maybe she was a demon or something, but there were horns sprouting from her head, and for some reason she was holding onto a vicious-looking metal rod.

”……”

The me on screen looked back and forth for a while between Ibuki-chan and the memo. Then I looked towards a shop employee, and the minute we made eye contact I looked down again. Geez, I was acting suspiciously.

”What’s wrong? She found what she was looking for…”

My brother was bouncing up and down, ready to leap to my aid, but Tsurugi held him back.

”Well, wait a bit. This is the true test now…”

Tsurugi let out a wicked smile.

Run away, Sasami…

It seemed that I had found what I was looking for, but I had no idea how to buy it.

There were a bunch of boxes piled up next to the case, but those were filled with only cheap things.

If you wanted to buy the expensive stuff that was locked in the glass case, you probably had to call a shop employee over and tell him what you wanted.

For someone like me who was pretty bad at communication, this was a difficult mission indeed.

I probably could’ve handled it if this was just a normal item, but this is an erotic figure we’re talking about.

I seemed to have made up my mind and headed for the register, but it didn’t seem like I could bring myself to say anything to the employee. I just passed silently by the register and then went back to the glass case.

I repeated the same motions a couple of times.

It was like I was a bear in a zoo.

The shopkeeper watched me act suspiciously. He might’ve thought I was a shoplifter because he was staring at me really sternly.

That just caused me to cower more and made it even more difficult for me to call out to him.

Shopping was hard.

Ahh, even for me, this was pretty painful to watch.

The me on screen wandered around, but then seemed to get tired and began slowing down before finally coming to a complete stop.

I was looking at… a wild wilderness of perversion that was spread out right in front of my eyes.

The adults-only area.

”……”

I was staring fiercely at that area.

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t interested in that kind of stuff.

I probably had no idea that my brother and Tsurugi were right next to me (well, of course I didn’t), so perhaps out of pure curiosity, the me on screen began to nervously wander into the adult area.

Kyah?!?!

Noo!!!

@@@@@@

”Ufufufu! She went in, she went in! Welcome to my world! If you wish, half that world is yours!”[3]

Tsurugi began to yell random, incomprehensible things, sounding a bit like the final boss of a video game.

”Let’s chase her, Tsukuyomi! If we get enough material here then I can make fun of her for half a yea-… Umm, I mean, it’s a teacher’s job to learn the habits of her students! So I am bound by that teacher’s code, and I’m also her guardian, so… am I right?!”

”That was what you were after all along, wasn’t it…? Well, Sasami-san is also at an age where she’s curious about a lot of things, so she really might be lured into that area of perversion if it’s dangled in front of her face like a carrot. She’s probably also a bit more daring since she’s wearing a disguise.”

Unaware that I was being followed by two awful adults, I began to look all around myself in the adult section.

I’m sure I looked really suspicious, but everyone in that section was so engrossed in their browsing that they didn’t have enough time to pay attention to me, so I was just fine.

”Waah… uwaah…”

The me on screen sounded pretty impressed… Ugh, this was embarrassing.

Just stop. Stop this awful, sadomasochistic scene, dammit…

”L-Little sister… moe…?”

[3] A reference to what the Dragon King says in Dragon Quest.

There were a few adult manga over in that section that customers could pick up and flip through.

Perhaps I was drawn to the title of one book, but I picked up a manga titled "Lovey Dovey~~ Love Chuu Oniichan" and gazed at the cover.

All the books around there were similar… Titles like "I love my oniichan no matter what!" and "B-But we're brother and sister…" and "This is forbidden, but I can't help myself… *thump thump*." It was all stuff like that.

"Eh? That… this… She's his little sister, right?"

I watched as the me on screen gulped and began to engross herself in the manga.

"B-But, this… why is… Ah, I guess that happens. But… ehh? This is… What is she doing? That's a guy's… ehh?!?!"

Oh my god, listening to me talk like this was so annoying.

-

"Umm, do you have a minute…?"

-

Suddenly, a guy wearing an apron with the Uzumenoana logo on it–in other words, an employee–tapped me on the shoulder. With a smile.

"Hyaah?!?!"

I panicked and looked up, opening my mouth and shutting it without a word. I looked like I was about to die.

”U-Umm, umm…. I-I was…”

The employee still had that bright smile on his face, and grabbed my arm firmly.

”You’re… a high school student, aren’t you?”

”U-Umm, n-no. I’m not. Umm… I’m-“

I was speaking ummumm-nese. Unfortunately, Japanese people didn’t speak that language.

”Could it be that you came for the seiyuu[4] show on the fourth floor? Well, you can follow me then! I do apologize, the stairs are hard to find sometimes. The stairs leading up to the fourth floor are in a bit of a weird place… They’re just over here~~.”

The employee was going on and on about something while pulling me along with him.

Considering I had just been caught reading an adult manga, I probably didn’t have the courage to correct the employee’s misunderstanding. All I could do was mutter **”Eh? Ah, yeah. That… seiyuu show… That’s what I wanted.”**

Like that, both the shop employee and I fell out of camera range.

”Ahh, Sasami-san was taken by an employee?! Let’s chase them, Tsurugi-sensei!”

My brother began to panic and chase after me, but right next to him…

”Shut up! You idiot! I told you I’m not an elementary schooler!”

[4] Voice actor/actress. For cultural reasons I refuse to translate this word to “voice actor.”

At some point, Tsurugi had managed to load her arms full of porn manga and doujinshi, and was now having a verbal sparring match with the person behind the cash register.

My brother did a double take.

”Just sell the damn things to me. I have the money, so why does it matter?!”

”But ojou-chan[5], these books are only for adults, okay?”

”I’m an adult, I’m telling you! Can’t you tell?! Look, I even have a damn driver’s license! Just look at this! It’s a teaching license! So back off!”

”Yes yes, ojou-chan. But forging these licenses and official documents is very, very bad, okay? It’s a serious crime.”

”They’re not forgeries! They’re completely real! Why aren’t you believing me even after I showed you my licenses?! I’m a damn adult!”

”Yes yes. Please come back when you’re an adult, ‘kay?”

”……”

My brother seemed to decide that he would be here for a while if he stayed and watched this pointless war drag on, so he left Tsurugi there and quickly chased after me.

[5] Honorific which basically translates to “little princess.”

Chapter 5: The Moon and the Sun's Game of Tag (Back Half)

There were way too many people crowded around here.

The camera was displaying me once again-this time, after I had been quickly dragged up to the fourth floor by the shop employee.

A pink, gaudy happi coat was wrapped around me, a fan with hearts drawn all over it was thrust into my hands, and before I knew it I had been transformed into a groupie.

After that, I was tossed into a relatively cramped room that wasn't any bigger than a standard classroom. But this room was filled to overflowing with people in the same outfit.

"Say! You! Say! You!"

Just because it was a "seiyuu" show didn't mean they had to keep chanting seiyuu seiyuu seiyuu… but whatever. It seemed that was the custom, so I followed along and shouted myself hoarse.

When you were in a crowd, the rules apparently were that you also had to frantically jump up and down with the bouncy music that was being blasted out at us, wave around the glow sticks we had been given, and squeal in high-pitched voices. If I didn't follow the crowd and do those things, people would look at me coldly and scold me with a "Come on, do it right already!"

"Say! You! Say! You!"

A strange fever began to envelope us.

I was a hikikomori, and before then I had been locked away at our family's shrine, living an isolated life.

So of course, I had never been to an event like this, and I really couldn't judge whether this situation was strange or not.

They said this was a "seiyuu show," but honestly it felt more like a concert or a live performance to me.

Some seiyuu-san I didn't recognize was out front singing heatedly about love or the world or whatever (I was shrimpy so I couldn't actually see the stage over the people in front of me). The people next to me were joining hand in hand and dancing wildly.

"Say! You! Say! You!"

Umm…

Why exactly was I here again?

My memories were getting a bit hazy, while the air around me began to heat up.

Poor little me was swept away by that ferocious atmosphere, pretty much swinging in midair as I joined hands with the people next to me and was pulled along. I couldn't think at all… everything had fallen into chaos.

My mind was getting fuzzy. My body was getting hot.

This was… this… didn't feel right.

This group of wild people was almost like a cult, sucking away my abilities to think for myself.

The music being blasted at us was just like a brainwashing song… it made me feel good even though it was nonsense, and I could feel my mind melting away.

If I did something wrong, the people next to me would scold me, so without realizing it I was being trained, letting my heart meld with that of the crowd. I could feel the boundary where “myself” ended and the crowd began starting to fade away.

I… I was…

Why… was I… ahh…

Sei… yuu…

“Say! You! Say! You!”

I was already half-hypnotized by the almost *religious* fervor filling this room. Meanwhile, my brother behind me, still filming me with the camera, couldn’t get any closer to me.

My brother had hurriedly chased me here, but this room had already reached full capacity, and he couldn’t make his way into this cramped space.

”H-Hey, let me through! Sasami-san! Can you hear me?! Ahh, it’s too loud in here… come on, get out of the way! Agh, ow! Hyah?!”

My brother was elbowed, kicked, and shoved to the ground by the excited crowd, and then trampled cruelly to the point where you could almost swear that was all a bit on purpose…

This was just like my brother, but please try a bit harder, oniichan.

”This… is bad… Sasami-san! Get away from here! There’s a strange smell in the air! They’re burning some strange incense or something! This isn’t a seiyuu show! Their goal is… their goal is… to brainwa-“

“Umm…”

My brother managed to scurry away from the barrage of kicks he was receiving, but still couldn’t get any closer to me. He just stayed back there, calling out to me frantically… when someone spoke up to him.

“Excuse me, but filming is not allowed…”

It was a woman who looked in her twenties and was wearing a security guard uniform.

She was timid-looking, and the edges of her eyebrows drooped downwards.

My brother had his face hidden and was filming through a camera, so I’m sure he looked insanely suspicious. This girl had probably come over to tell him off… she was most likely one of the security personnel here at the seiyuu show.

”Eh? Ah, no, I’m just trying to get to Sasami… hm?”

My brother shouldn’t have eyes for anybody other than me, but he turned around to face the security guard.

He seemed to be surprised.

”Huh? You’re… I know you…”

”Hueh? E-Ehhhh?!?”

The security guard was also clearly surprised, and for whatever reason began to back away from my brother, an expression of utter shock on her face.

”K-K-Kamiomi-san?! Why are you here?!”

”Ahh, as I thought, you’re from the Tsukuyomi Shrine…”

At my brother’s words, I also figured it out.

Now that I took a closer look, she did look awfully familiar… I was fooled for a minute since she was dressed up as a security guard, but this was definitely a miko from the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

”Y-Y-You’re wrong! I don’t know of this ‘Tsukuyomi Shrine’ or whatever! Y-You’ve got the wrong person…. P-P-Please leave, Kamiomi-san!”

”But you know my name, so it’s clear that we know each other, right?”

… The Tsukuyomi Shrine.

They were a strange clan, in which generation after generation, a Tsukuyomi miko would inherit the power of the Supreme God Amaterasu into her body, becoming enshrined there as the clan’s leader and using her powers to maintain a world that was convenient for human life.

They were also my biological family.

The other day, the Yagami sisters had attacked the shrine, and the Tsukuyomi Shrine should’ve been destroyed, but…

”If people from the shrine are here… don’t tell me that this suspicious event is…?!”

”Hyahhh?! N-No, I don’t know anything at all! It’s not like the family head, Sasami-sama’s father, ordered all the remaining members of the Tsukuyomi Shrine to go and perform a ritual together or something like that!!”

”Thank you for the explanation… this is bad, Sasami-san!!”

Thanks to this overly careless miko, I also now knew what was going on.

Everyone in this religiously charged event space was a member of the Tsukuyomi Shrine. In other words, everyone here was a spiritual user, and was part of an organization that had been pulling the strings behind the curtains.

They had all left the shrine and had come here to perform some ritual centered on me to achieve some goal.

The shrine had already been destroyed, so I had thought that these people were now harmless and had let down my guard… this was so ridiculous.

It seemed that the Tsukuyomi Shrine still had absolutely no intention of leaving me alone.

”Kyaaaahh?!”

Suddenly, a shriek echoed around the event hall.

The origin of that shriek was the me inside the screen.

My brother hurriedly pointed the camera in the direction of the disturbance.

People were still moving all around and there was a suspicious rainbow-colored light reflecting everywhere so it was hard to tell anything from anything, but my clothes were beginning to come loose.

I was getting jostled by so many people that my outfit was being thrown into disarray.

My shoulders were now bare.

“T-The seal…”

I could hear my voice weakly calling out.

Seal? That meant…

”Now!”

That voice was much louder.

The seiyuu-san who had been singing her brainwashing song yelled that out loudly.

Right, everyone here belonged to the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

The seiyuu who was singing was probably a fake, and was actually a spiritual user from the shrine.

She was singing in a voice infused with spiritual energy to disturb my thoughts, steal away my consciousness, and render me unable to use the power of the Supreme God temporarily…

I had fallen half-asleep and was completely defenseless, when…

”Hya…. Fueh?!”

I opened my eyes in a panic, but I was already too late.

Regardless of how it looked, the people around me grabbed both my hands and stuck charms all over my body, restraining me from moving both physically or spiritually.

Of course, even though these people had trained their spiritual powers, their divinity wasn't very high, so it's not like the likes of these spiritualists would be powerful enough to bind the power of the Supreme God for more than a few seconds. Even if I was brainwashed and completely disoriented.

However, a few seconds was all they needed.

"Rejoice!"

A man in white clothing jumped a few meters in a single leap and pressed down upon me.

A metallic glint shone through the air, and I saw that his hand was gripping a double-edged sword.

I recognized that sword.

It was the deified blade, the Totsuka no Tsurugi.[1]

It wasn't a particularly rare or high-class spiritual weapon, but depending on how you used it, you could even cut down gods.

"Oh Sun, surrender thy beautiful throne to the Moon, and bestow upon humanity a new chronicler!"

The man who leapt at me shouted.

I recognized him.

His eyes were stern, but his hair was long for a man and he looked quite small and youthful.

[1] The sword of Susanoo, a god in Japanese mythology.

Tsukuyomi Ruza… my father.

”Do not move, Sasami! Resistance is meaningless!”

With fluid motions, my father brought down the Totsuka no Tsurugi upon me, as I stood there unable to move.

”……?!”

The blade my father was holding pierced into my chest from above, and cut off the small bulge near my collarbone… the sarcoma.

Now that the seal which had been sealing it had fallen off, the sarcoma began to swell until it was around the size of a heart.

”Fuhaha! Good, good, good!!”

My father grabbed the blood-soaked sarcoma and began to laugh victoriously.

”My daughter, do not think badly of me… your father will take on your excess baggage! Sleep in peace!”

My father roared with laughter in front of me, as I crumbled to the ground.

Did I faint? Had I…died?

I remained motionless at the center of that pool of blood.

H-Huh…?

I… died?

Then… why was I here… watching this video…?

@@@@@@

What was all this?

The me on screen was losing blood and slowly becoming a corpse.

There was way too much blood.

Even if I was still breathing, it wouldn't be long before my life would cease to be.

So… who exactly was the me here, the me who was watching the me on screen die?

"……"

Almost unconsciously, I stripped off my uniform and looked down at my chest.

There was nothing there.

There was no sarcoma… there wasn't even a scar.

I felt my heart thump.

I was forgetting something… something bad.

@@@@@@

"T-This… Father, do you have any idea what you've just done?!"

Things steadily progressed on screen.

It was rare to hear my brother sound so enraged. My father finally seemed to notice him.

He snorted.

”Well well, if it isn’t Kamiomi… you’ve already been excommunicated from this family, so do not call me ‘Father’.”

My father smiled an unhappy-looking smile while still holding onto the sarcoma.

”This is all in order to take back the power of the Supreme God. My daughter ran away from us with the family treasure, so it’s only natural for us to chase her down and take back what’s ours while inflicting some amount of pain on her.”

The sarcoma wriggled within my father’s hand.

”And everything was planned by *this one*.”

My father was completely calm, as if he didn’t think of my brother as a threat at all.

”Sasami had tried to seal this one, but her seals grew weak and this one slowly regained its consciousness. And then, this one contacted us after our shrine had been destroyed and we were left wandering on our own, secretly exchanged information with us, and proposed the plan you see here to us.”

I see. So a crack had formed in the sarcoma’s seal.

I had been mumbling something about that too during my brother’s commercial (?).

”The power of the Supreme God is passed down by blood in the mikos of the Tsukuyomi line. This one is the god of Sasami’s physical body, and he sought to steal that power and then separate from her body to escape.”

The sarcoma was the deity associated with my physical being, but he had been trained by the people back at the shrine and had his own separate personality. It was a god who stood in a peculiar position, being one with me and yet possessing a separate consciousness.

The sarcoma’s instinct told it that its greatest goal was to protect Tsukuyomi Sasami. However, the sarcoma’s personality was trained by the people at the shrine.

So it wasn’t strange that the sarcoma would want to help out its original masters.

”The power of the Supreme God is now right here. Right here within my hands.”

My father held out the sarcoma proudly.

That thing had stolen it. Stolen the power of the Supreme God from me.

While I had been under the influence of that brainwashing song and that strange incense in the air, while the religious ritual was robbing me of my consciousness and my ability to use my spiritual powers, both the sarcoma and the power of the Supreme God had been taken from me.

It was quite a desperate move for them to take advantage of the rift between me and the sarcoma, but their plan had succeeded.

”You all destroyed our shrine, and I admit we were left in shambles for a while… but now everything will return to normal. Do not look so afraid, Kamiomi. There could’ve been no happier conclusion than this.”

But there was a bit of fear in my father's voice.

"Sasami should still be alive. If you hurry and bring her to a hospital, she will certainly not die. And now that this one has lost the power of the Supreme God, she is no longer of any concern to the shrine. You two can proceed and live the normal, peaceful life that you've always dreamed of."

My father looked around cautiously, almost like a misbehaving child fearful of his parents.

"Rather, you should be thanking me. If *that woman* had shown up, we wouldn't have been able to finish this so quickly and simply. Even I do believe my children are lovely. Forget about the shrine and live freely, Sasami, Kamiomi. Leave the rest to Father. If we continue to fight much more, that woman will come."

"That woman"? Who was he talking about?

Who was my father so afraid of?

"I cannot."

My brother took a number of charms and spells into his hands and stood straight up, staring down the people of the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

It was quite unlike him. He was always so unreliable and wishy-washy…

"That sarcoma is a part of Sasami-san. No, it's the very essence of Sasami-san's physical being. If she loses that, who knows what kind of defects will show up in Sasami-san's body later. It's even possible this will be fatal. I won't let anybody take any piece of Sasami's body or mind, no matter how small."

Even though this was my brother we were talking about, both my father and the other people from the shrine were clearly afraid.

My brother ignored all the others as they stared at him cautiously, and just walked straight to me.

He picked up my body, which now truly looked close to death.

”That is my purpose.”

And then my brother leapt into action… is what I wanted to say. If that happened, I might’ve truly fallen in love with him again. But…

-

”Hyaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

-

Suddenly, the wall right next to my brother was smashed up, sending rubble, the shrine members, and my brother all flying at once. And then, Yagami Tsurugi appeared.

”Damn annoying, those suckers back there! You really thought you could stop this cute and lovely Tsurugi-chan with those low-level youkai,[2] haah?! All the damn eromanga I bought was burned up in the battle, you bastards! I’ll kill all you damn halfwits! … Oh, Tsukuyomi. What’re you doing under my foot there?”

”Just… don’t worry about me…”

My brother was now lying flat on his face with Tsurugi stepping on him. Maybe he was a bit depressed at having his spotlight stolen, or maybe he was happy about getting abused by this chibi sensei, but my brother didn’t try to move.

[2] Japanese demons/monsters.

”Tch, she already broke through…?!”

My father, in a panic, pointed his bloodstained Totsuka no Tsurugi at Tsurugi.[3]

It seemed that, in order to prevent any intrusions to their little ritual of cutting the sarcoma from my body, they had positioned a bunch of youkai (sometimes low-level gods were called youkai) to guard the area.

”Funyaa.”

Kagami suddenly peeked in from the hole that Tsurugi had opened along the wall.

”I thought I felt something suspicious, and now I see the Tsukuyomi Shrine members… ahh, I’m so sleepy… interrupting me when I’m blissfully sleeping is a heavy crime, you know.”

She had been happily snoozing away at the bathhouse, but it seemed she had been woken up by a certain uneasy presence and had come here to help.

”Y-You bastards…!”

Considering that the Yagami sisters were the ones who had destroyed the Tsukuyomi Shrine, it was no wonder that my father was losing his temper.

”How fortunate it is to meet you here! What a perfect opportunity to erase the grudge I still feel from you destroying the legendary Tsukuyomi Shrine! You may have been able to take us by surprise then, but this time we’ve come fully prepared! Prepare to taste defeat by the hands of the most capable irregularity eradicators this land has to offer!”

[3] Yes, in case you were wondering, tsurugi does translate to sword. It does make this sentence kinda awkward though…

My father was going on and on like that, talking himself into an excited frenzy.

But this time, he'd chosen the most awful opponents for that. In many ways.

-

"Out of the way out of the way out of the way~~~!!!"

-

A shrill voice echoed through the room.

That sounded like Tama's voice.

And at the same time, the ceiling was destroyed as an unidentified flying object the size of a car dropped down.

Yeah… that was a UFO.

It was round and silver-colored. There was no mistaking this for anything else but a "yuufo"~~ (said in the tone of someone who was bored of earth boys).[4]

The ceiling was easily crushed under the weight of the UFO while people were thrown all around. The UFO continued to drop down, leaving nothing spared in its path as it sent rubble in all directions and crushed everything to powder.

What amazing destructive power…

Maybe it was because Tsurugi had already opened a big hole in the wall, but the ceiling and walls now were all blown away and a hole even opened up in the floor.

[4] I thought this was a Suzumiya reference, but upon Googling, it actually seems to be a reference to the song UFO by Pink Lady.

The building was half destroyed. If you thought there was a breeze before…

”Gyaahh?!?!?”

Someone screamed. I didn’t know who. Everyone was probably screaming.

The UFO rotated a few times, continuing to break through the building’s walls and finally charging outside. And then, it went into a freefall.

At last, the UFO crashed into the earth below, creating a huge crater in the asphalt, before coming to a complete stop.

The people of the Tsukuyomi Shrine, my brother, Tsurugi, and myself… we all fell right down after that UFO and whirled ominously right for the ground!

But miraculously (it was also probably because of divine intervention), it seemed that nobody had died, although you could see splatters of blood here and there, as well as a huge commotion as rubble and glass fell all around.

Dust, pieces of concrete, and glass fragments blew violently all around.

Both my brother’s Camera One and Kagami’s Camera Two couldn’t properly take in the whole scene, only showing the wanton maelstrom of destruction.

Kagami’s camera might’ve broken, because I saw noise fly across the screen before the display went dark.

Miraculously, my brother’s camera seemed to have survived, but he appeared to have dropped it, since the screen turned round and round a bit before becoming still. I could see what looked like a corner of the silver UFO at the bottom of the display.

”Sorrrrrrrrrrrryyyyy~~~~!”

A crack ran down the UFO's smooth surface, when suddenly an entranceway appeared and a ramp extended down to the ground.

The person who came down the ramp was… well, it was a bit difficult to tell because the camera was so low, but judging from her voice and the length of her legs that was probably Tama.

"Is everyone okay? Howawawa… Tama's sorry! Tama and the others, we were chased by the guv-ern-mint and ran away… and Tama thought she would go save Tsurugi-nee! But the bray-ks were broken and we had to go through the building!"

Tama sounded on the verge of tears, when a thing with sleek-looking silver skin came out next to her.

The camera angle was once again too low for me to make it completely out, but it was clearly not human.

That silver-colored whatever-it-was went softly over to Tama, and cried out in a high-pitched howl.

"Kyupii…"

"Don't worry, Tama will protect you! Tama will never hand over Ntos Modento, the controller of the mysteries of the universe, to the guv-ern-mint! Don't cry! Those brave parents protected you with their lives! Return to your home planet and live a long life!"

Tama embraced this mysterious being.

While I wasn't looking, it seemed like this had turned into some completely random drama.

I really didn't want to get involved in this though, so I'll refrain from prying for details.

"We found them! It's the aliens!"

"You! Girl over there! Do you have any idea what you're doing?! This is a crisis! A matter of life or death! Just leave it to the United Earth Government and hand over that evil alien!"

People dressed in full combat gear and who looked like some kind of special forces came charging in, firing warning shots into the air.

At the same time, a medicinal-looking green smoke began to fill the area, making the unwounded Tsurugi cough (she also seemed to have hugged my brother close to protect him from the fall).

"Cough cough… what the hell is this?! Tear gas?! Also, what the hell's going on?! What kind of plot twist is this?!"

"Seems like this is a drug that will cause memory loss… try not to breathe it in, neesan! It might not harm us, but this gas is thick enough that it could induce mental breakdown in humans!"

Kagami was yelling about something.

The special forces people ignored her, and just rushed towards Tama and the alien-like creature she was holding onto.

"Show no mercy to anyone who gets in our way! All units, attack! Attack formation delta!"

"This is your last warning! For humanity… for the future of Earth, hand over that alien!"

”Earth was the side that kidnapped Kyupi-chan first and started a big space war! Kyupi-chan’s parents were going to forgive you and go back to their planet super quietly too! That was all ruined because of you~~!”

Tama was yelling about something.

”Run, Kyupi-chan! Sorry, everyone! Tama will explain later!”

Tama picked up this Kyupi-chan or whatever and began running away with all her might.

The special forces people violently dashed after her, leaving only the dust and green smoke showing on screen. It was a complete train wreck…

This was the very definition of chaos. And in the midst of all that…

”U-Ughhh…”

Something… something was rolling on the ground right past Camera One.

It was a little red and black ball of meat, dripping with blood.

This was the sarcoma that had been cut off of my body…

It seemed that the sarcoma had fallen from my father’s hands and was now rolling around on the ground.

”Have to… run… away…”

The sarcoma was creating an alteration, through which it transformed, grew arms and legs… and slowly took the shape of a human.

At this point, it still vaguely looked like a clay doll, but it was slowly but surely

changing its shape to be human. I heard a raspy, shaky moan come out from its mouth.

”I… will be free… free…”

At that point, Camera One seemed to have reached its limit. The screen filled with static, and the display went dark.

@@@@@@

”Well, that’s pretty much it.”

A voice suddenly echoed out from behind me once the video and sound both cut out.

I felt an electric shock run right down my spine, and I almost leapt up as I hastily turned around.

At some point, Tsurugi, the eldest of the Yagami sisters, had snuck up behind me and was standing there with a bored expression on her face and a crimson-colored bundle across her shoulder.

There was nobody else there.

It was just Tsurugi and me in this room.

Ummmmm…

What did she mean, “that’s pretty much it”?

Even as I thought about that, some part of my mind… perhaps the part you could call “instinct,” already understood everything that was going on.

Hurry.

Hurry up and run.

“Umm, I guess the video cut out suddenly there, so I’ll just summarize what happened after that for you.”

There was a strange hint of irritation in Tsurugi’s voice as she spoke to me lazily, not minding my reactions.

“Tama and that alien whatever and those special forces disappeared off somewhere, and we still don’t know where they are. Kagami and I beat up those people from the Tsukuyomi Shrine, to the point where all they could do was babble ‘We won’t do anything bad anymore. We love you, Tsurugi-chan.’ Tsukuyomi called an ambulance and went to the hospital with Sasami, who had suffered surprisingly heavy injuries.”

I see. After all… a part of my chest had been cut away.

I had lost a lot of blood, and even if I didn’t die I would’ve at least been hospitalized.

But… hmm?

Something was strange here…

“Because of that drug those special forces were spreading around, your consciousness was thrown into disarray, you lost your memories, and you don’t even seem to remember who you are anymore. I used a little alteration to make that DVD for the purposes of correcting that discrepancy.”

Tsurugi pointed at the computer screen I had been staring at until a little bit ago and made the following declaration:

-

“Have you finally remembered who you are… Sarcoma-chan?”

-

Her words sent my mind for a huge loop.

A huge flood of emotions and memories washed over my psyche.

That’s right.

That was it…

“After all, you and Sasami shared the same body, to the point where you could say you two were the same person. I was a bit surprised that you suddenly thought you were Tsukuyomi Sasami, but I guess it’s not impossible. You might’ve had holes in your memories, but you were exhausted, so you did something that would be natural for Tsukuyomi Sasami to do… you *came home*.”

I see. So that was this sense of weariness running through my body.

It wasn’t because I was still getting used to an unfamiliar school life… it was because I had been a part of that huge fuss.

“You were so helpless back then that we should’ve just dealt with you then. But… you were in such a pitiful state, you know? But you understand, right? Sarcoma-chan, you’re one part of Sasami’s body. If you stay separated, then who knows what kind of irregular things will start to happen to Sasami.”

Tsurugi pulled out a beautiful sword from the scarlet bundle.

“So I’ll just put you into a reaaaally faint sleep, alter you back to a lump of meat, stick you right onto Sasami again, and fuse you back into one body. Then everything will be back to normal.”

“D-Don’t screw with me…”

I stood up, grinding my teeth angrily and glaring at Tsurugi.

“I-I’ll become free!”

I mustered all my strength and shouted that out loud.

“Sasami and I might’ve been in the same body, but I was born and raised as a different consciousness! Do you know the pain of being trapped in someone else’s body, not being able to do anything?! I was finally cut off, became free… so I’m gonna live how I want to live! Not as another part of Tsukuyomi Sasami, but as myself!”

Yes.

That’s why I waited until the seals had relaxed and contacted the Tsukuyomi Shrine… I had hatched a plan to separate myself from Sasami with their help.

Because of my function, I could not harm Sasami.

After all, my first and foremost priority was the protection of Tsukuyomi Sasami.

But even then, I twisted that.

If Sasami lost the power of the Supreme God, then she would be protected… she would no longer be the “main character,” and would be able to live a normal, peaceful life. I persuaded and tricked my instincts into believing that argument.

As for the actual task of separating myself from Sasami… I left that to the experts: the people at the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

And they… they did their job splendidly.

I escaped from the prison that was Sasami’s body and became free.

Do you really think I could go back at this point, and just be trapped again…?!

“You idiot…”

I laughed loudly and then glared again at Tsurugi.

“You should’ve dealt with me while I didn’t have my memories! To think you would’ve gone out of your way to remind me… don’t forget, the power of the Supreme God rests in this body! I’m the ‘main character’ of this world! And a small fry like you… I could boil you, fry you, do whatever I want with you!”

I had separated from Sasami’s body and taken the power of the Supreme God with me, so I had the authority to say that.

Gods could not disobey other gods with higher divinities.

So if I had the power of the Supreme God, then I was the strongest in every sense! I was invincible!

“I command you in the name of the Supreme God! You will-“

“*Give it back.*”

Tsurugi mumbled that, a determined, cold look on her face.

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"*This toy is way too nice for a bastard like you.*"

-

It happened in the next moment.

I felt something sublime getting sucked out from the center of my body and moving to Tsurugi.

What followed was a feeling of exhaustion, as if the blood had been drained right out of me.

I felt my hips give way from my arrogant pose. I lost strength and crumpled to the ground, gazing at Tsurugi with wonder in my eyes.

Right in front of me…

Right in front of me stood an extraordinary existence.

"If you came quietly without a fuss, I was going to treat you kindly too… you idiot, didn't I tell you before? The Supreme God's power was just something I had lent to Ninigi-kun. If I want it back, all I have is to ask for it and it'll become mine again. Don't go off arrogantly sumo wrestling in someone else's loin cloth."

It felt like my retinas… no, my entire existence was going up in flames.

But the minute my eyeballs were burned up, I saw something so beautiful that it couldn't have belonged to this world.

Something with the sublime beauty and power of the sun.

“Well, don’t worry. It’s not like I don’t take a bit of pity on you.”

Her tone was short and frank, but that beautiful something… she smiled.

“It’s not like I’ve ever really been a diligent god… but sometimes I can create a miracle or two.”

My body was melting… it felt like I was an ice cube put in the middle of a desert.

Ahh, but for some reason… it was a pleasant feeling.

Chapter 6: I've Tried Hard Enough Today

"Sasamisaaan~~."

My brother was calling me.

I quickly straightened out my bed hair and gave a nice, long stretch.

Outside my window, I saw that the sun had already sunk below the horizon, bringing forth a calm night.

"Sasamisaan~~. Sa. Sa. Mi. Saaaan~~. Your name has so many 'sa's in it, Sasami-saaan~~. It's your oniichan, please let me into your roooom~~. Ahah, maybe I need a password to get in! You're testing your oniichan's love, aren't you?! Ah, I know, 'Who's the person Sasami-san loves the most in the world?' And the answer is… 'Oniichan,' right?! That's the password, right?!"

"Ugh, shut up! Stop making so much noise in the hospital!"

I took off the night cap I was wearing and threw it at the door.

I was in our town's general hospital, resting in a room on the top floor.

I was wearing a pair of pajamas that Tsurugi had brought me a while ago.

I lifted my body up and sat on my bed. Maybe I had lost too much blood, or maybe it was the painkillers I was on, but I felt really woozy.

It appeared I had suffered a wound serious enough to put me on the boundary between life and death, and up until a little bit ago nobody was allowed to visit me.

Although, Tsurugi had snuck in through the window earlier to pay me a visit.

Meanwhile, my brother had been obediently waiting outside all this time, and he seemed really worried.

“Sasami-san!”

My brother’s patience ran out and he bound into the room with his usual embarrassing dance-like enthusiasm. Thank God I was in a private room.

“Are you safe?! Does it hurt anywhere?! Anywhere?! Ahh, Sasami-san, I feel so sorry for you! If I could switch places with you, I would! No, I’ll switch right now! Show me where it hurts! Come on, quickly! Our sibling bond and my love for you will create a miracle, and transfer all the pain to me-“

“Stop spouting all your nonsense and hugging me! Kyah! My chest is where the wound is, dammit! Stop, stop stripping me, you damn pervert oniichan! I’ll kill you, you weirdo!”

I sent a shower of awful abuse at my brother, but even then I was pretty disoriented.

I really couldn’t remember everything too well…

Today at school, Tsurugi told me to buy some things for her, and because she was always helping me out here and there, I agreed to do that.

I remembered going to a drugstore to buy some things, and then… what happened after that? I do remember wandering around Uzumenoana a bit, but then my memories kind of faded out…

But when I looked down at my chest, I saw that the sarcoma had vanished.

At least I didn’t have to worry about when it would take over my body again.

Although, I was a bit conflicted. It almost felt a bit lonely, like a roommate had just moved out.

Ahh, speaking of the sarcoma, when Tsurugi visited me earlier, she had said something strange.

”Both Tsukuyomi Sasami and that sarcoma inhabited the same body. You could say they were the same person. But, I decided to save one, and condemn the other. Why do you think that was?”

I mean, it’s not like I knew what she was talking about, so of course I couldn’t answer.

”The sarcoma had done something wicked, and had involved a lot of humans in that wickedness. So I punished him. But he wanted the same exact thing as Sasami… to live freely. Both of you also cause trouble for the people around you.”

That’s right.

I had betrayed the hopes of all the people at the Tsukuyomi Shrine, and had submitted to a carefree, peaceful lifestyle.

If anybody hated me for it, or wished me harm, it was all my own fault.

”So, in the end, the sarcoma had committed a single sin.”

Tsurugi put her hand on my chest and smiled.

”He was so obsessed with getting his own happiness that he even sacrificed others. He mistook the power of the Supreme God as his own, and used it selfishly. You, however, are aware that you cause others trouble, but are apologetic because of it, and you try hard to minimize the damage to the people around you… you really do try hard.”

Her fingertip was warm like the sun.

”You make sure you don’t ask for too much, and even if you have the power of the Supreme God, you restrain it and definitely don’t use it for your own gain. Rather, you’re tossed around by that power, to the point where you dislike it and want to reject it. You’re the complete opposite of that sarcoma… so, I hope an old grump like me can place my hopes in you for just a while longer and give you this for safekeeping.”

A sublime, extraordinary something filled my body to the brim.

”Please continue to do your best. Until you can finally lead that peaceful life you wanted and don’t have to try hard anymore. Until you can go on like a normal girl, used to a mundane life with no strange powers or Supreme Gods who don’t follow the rules. Watching you humans struggle with things like that is the only thing that brings this tired, worn-out girl joy anymore.”

Tsurugi continued to spout things I couldn’t make head nor tail of, and then calmly left through the window.

What was all of that about? What did Tsurugi mean…?

“Sasami-san.”

My brother suddenly lifted his face up and watched me from point-blank range.

“I watched the SWP and I found something a bit strange. If you used the power of the Supreme God, you could achieve all your goals so much more easily.”

SWP? What was that?

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“But I finally understood. Sasami-san wants to learn and grow not as a god, but as a human. Your oniichan is very proud of that. Tsurugi-sensei and the others and I… that’s why we want to support you and cheer you on forever.”

“Eh? Ahh, okay…”

My brother seemed really happy. But visiting hours were apparently over, and my brother was forcibly pulled from the room by the nurses as he frantically waved at me.

“Please… try hard from here on out, Sasami-san!”

Sorry, Oniichan.

But, I’m completely exhausted right now.

Yawn…

I let out a yawn and lay down on my back, sinking luxuriously into complete stillness.

It’s not like there was any point in overdoing it.

I wouldn’t try hard any more today.

Chapter 7: Personal Notes From the Yagami Sisters

We had a huge feast tonight.

My younger sister (the antisocial one) usually did all our house chores by herself, and when something made her happy, she wouldn't show it on her face at all but would make us a splendid meal. (In case you're curious, when she was in a bad mood, she would just give us C*lorieMate. At least make us something from scratch, dammit.)

Kagami was happy because today… I had brought a bunny back home.

She was so noisy, with all her 'I want that as a pet, I want that as a pet' whining. Well, it's not like it's a bad thing to be nice to her once in a while, and because Kagami wasn't expecting a present she was just so overcome with emotion that she even made us a mousse for dessert.

I'm so full…

Even now, Kagami's in the living room, rolling around and playing with the bunny. I could hear her calling out to it in a coaxing voice I've never heard coming out of her mouth. "Hello, Meat-chan[1]~~ my name is Kagami-oneechan~~ ufufufu," she's saying.

By the way, our family's new bunny was named "Meat-chan."

Honestly, I'm not sure that's a great name for a pet, and it makes me think we want to eat him or something. Well, I guess we're just trying to respect its original name (although, it's not completely clear to me whether "sarcoma" was really its original name. But it's not like we could name the bunny "Sasami," right?).

[1] The bunny's name is Niku-chan. Niku means meat.

I was thinking that maybe I'd use an alteration to transform it into a human and give it a place among the humans… but it had lured out the people from the Tsukuyomi Shrine, had done bad things with them and then harmed the *real* Sasami, so a bit of punishment was probably okay here.

Speaking of Sasami-san, even though she'd lost so much blood, her injuries weren't too bad. After I turned the sarcoma into a bunny, I just stuck the extra meat on Sasami, did a little alteration, and… well, I saved her.

By the way, I also stealthily transferred the power of the Supreme God back into her body too.

It's not like I'll ever go back to that damn annoying job of being the Supreme God, so until Tama matures enough to be the next Supreme God, I'll be relying on Sasami a bit longer. Even though I feel a bit sorry for the girl.

We'll just do it like we've been doing it so far, and we'll clean up any problems that come up because Sasami has that power. I'm a bit curious about that "woman" the Tsukuyomi Shrine people were talking about, but whatever will come will come. They won't be a match for us anyways.

After I gave up my powers and became just an empty shell that used to be the Supreme God, I didn't have too much of a reason or right to stay on this world… but this way I've been given a bit of a new purpose and I've found a place in this land where I belong.

There's plenty of headaches too, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy myself day to day like this.

If I could be allowed to act like a human and pray to the infinite gods up there…

Then please, gods above, if you can grant my wishes… just let me be here a while longer…

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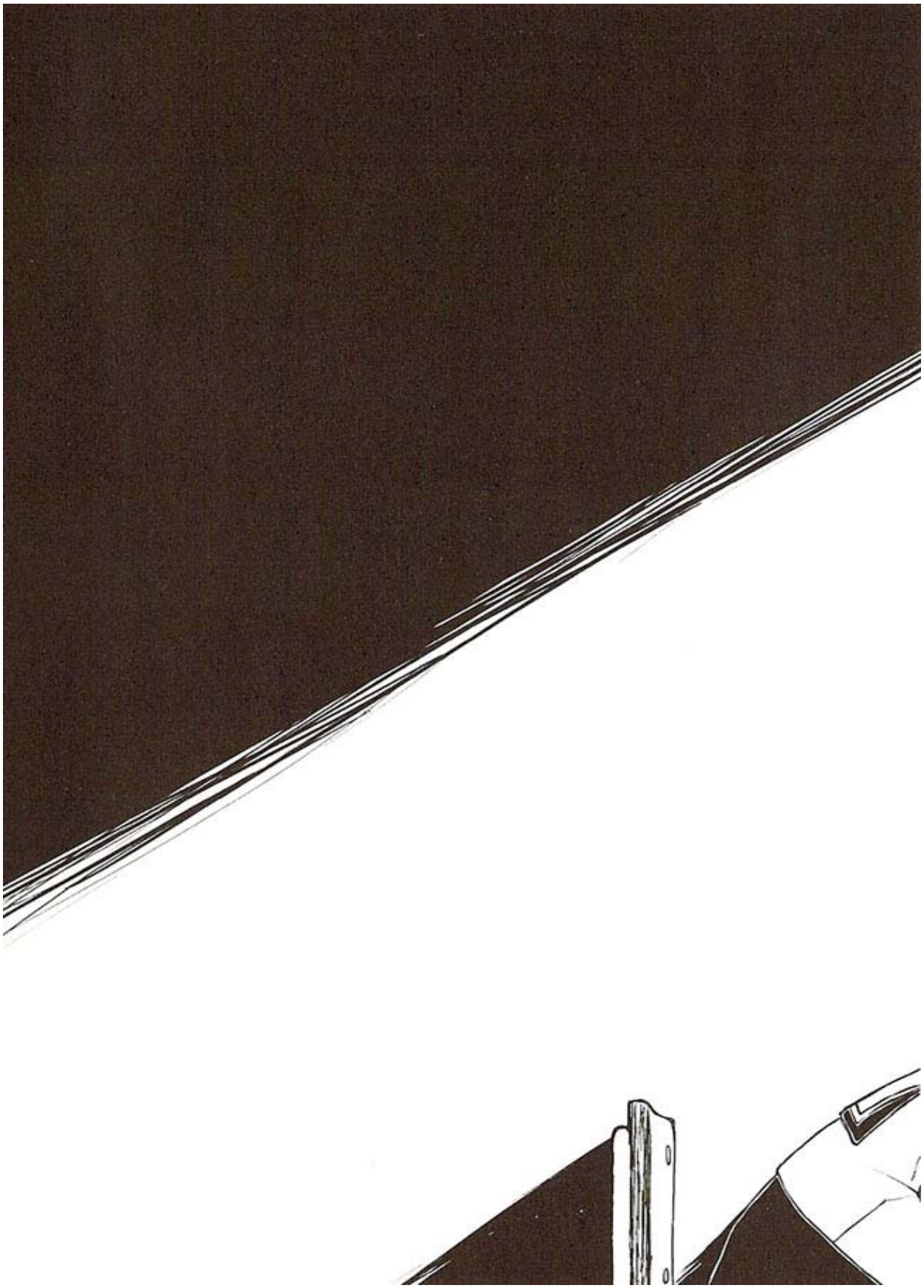
Ah, by the way, my other little sister (the hyper one) ended up coming back home in the middle of the night. She put some sparkly silver-colored gift in her desk, and even though Kagami and I were pretty worried, she just looked at us and went "Ah, don't worry, everything is fine now~~!" Ugh, talking all cocky like that…

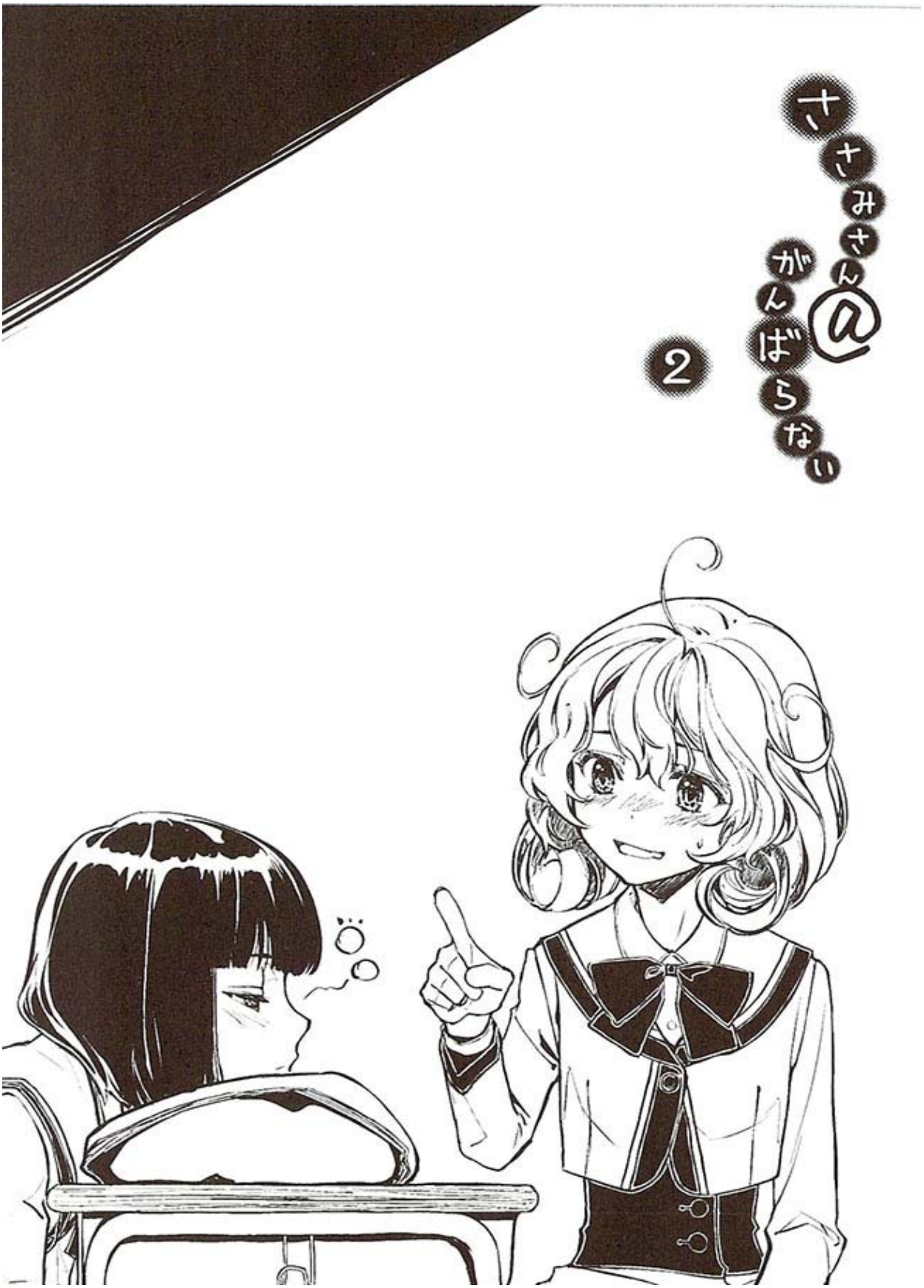
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Sasami-san and Tama would both grow up.

They would become adults and mature right alongside this world.

And seeing that would bring me joy.




ささみさん@がんばらない
2

PART 2: YATA NO KAGAMI[1]

Chapter 8: Better Friend

It was after school at Konohana Sakuya Academy.

It was right after the afternoon classes which focused on simple learning, and a sense of lazy release filled the air.

“Kagami.”

To pass the time, I had slowly and deliberately packed up my things, pointlessly gone to the bathroom to check my face in the mirror and to wash my hands, and in general just stood idly around.

However, the person I was waiting for – Kagami – showed absolutely no signs of wanting to go home. In fact, she was sprawled out on her desk and in a death-like sleep, so I finally decided to gather up my courage and walk up to her.

I wish she would’ve gone home right after class. Then I could’ve just used the excuse “Ahh, it’d be wrong of me to bother her when she’s in such a hurry, so I’ll wait until tomorrow to talk with her.”

How inconsiderate of her, ugh.

“Kagami, Kagami.”

“……?”

[1] A sacred mirror in Japanese folklore. The same mirror used to lure Amaterasu (in this series, Tsurugi) out of hiding from her cave.

I shook her by the shoulders as she slept there like a doll, and she finally lifted her head up and looked at me suspiciously.

She looked horribly sleepy… though she always looked like that.

“Funyaa. What is it, Sasami-san? I was quite happily sleeping just a minute ago.”

“Ah, sorry sorry. I have something to ask you.”

Considering my communication skills were a bit lacking, I tended to cower whenever somebody gave me a scary look.

“By the way, why exactly is Kagami sleeping all the time? Don’t you sleep at home? Or maybe there’s too much going on at home for you to sleep?“

“At home? I do sleep at home.”

Ugh, wake up, dammit.

“Did you interrupt my sleep just to ask me that?”

Kagami continued to grumble about being sleepy, but at least she sat up enough that she could properly listen to me.

“You do realize that I’m also busy, yes? If this is something trivial then I’ll get angry.”

Busy people don’t sleep that much.

“Umm, well… uhh, it’s not that big of a deal, but…”

I twiddled my fingers as I began to speak. Geez, even for me, that sounded really timid.

My face blushed bright red as Kagami just looked more and more suspicious.

“Well…”

I blurted it out to the world.

-

“Please become my friend!”

-

……

“……”

A hellish silence filled the room.

Kagami looked at me with tremendously doubtful eyes, like I was really an alien in disguise or something. After that, she took a really fancy-looking pillow out from her desk drawer and buried her face in it.

Once I saw that she had begun to lightly snore again, I desperately grabbed and pulled her ear.

“Don’t sleep! Please don’t! Just listen to me! I’m being serious here!”

“Funyaa… I can feel some intense negativity in the air… just let me sleep… I don’t want to get involved with this at all.”

Kagami seemed like she couldn’t be bothered to help. I began to get desperate, tears forming in my eyes.

Well, I've come this far already. Might as well go all the way. I'll explain everything to her!

"Think about it! I started school in February, which is a really random time, right?! And on top of that, not only is it pretty sketchy that I'm the homeroom teacher's sister, but that idiot oniichan of mine introduced me on the first day with 'Sasami-san was always a hikikomori… she's a very sad, sad girl' and now everyone is totally avoiding me!"

Everything was my brother's fault.

"It's not like they're bullying me… it's more like everyone is being way too considerate. They treat me like I'm some kind of tumor or something… just standing far off to the side and watching me from there… and everyone uses formal Japanese when they talk to me! I can't make friends like this! People answer me when I talk to them, but it's like I can't do anything but make small talk… everyone is just way too nice! It's unnatural!"

I knew I was being selfish, but I couldn't take this anymore!

I wasn't some poor little girl everyone had to watch out for!

"I-I want to have a normal school life! I've always wanted something like that… to make friends, to join a club after school… to laugh and cry… you get it?! But everyone just acts so distant from me… so the dream is still way too much of a dream!"

I mean, today the only conversation I had outside of class was with a class representative. "Umm, I've filled out this careers questionnaire… i-is this okay?" (I was trying my very best to get her to talk to me here) "Ah, yes. Thank you very much" (Two seconds, conversation over). That was it!

It's not like I was some frightened bunny or something, but I was seriously about to die from loneliness here!

"Sigh…"

Kagami looked at me through sleepy, half-lidded eyes and cocked her head slightly to the side.

"Well, I understand what you're saying, and I can sympathize… however, I still do not know why you are asking me to be your friend."

Kagami sounded as indifferent as ever.

"Everyone still just doesn't know how to talk with Sasami-san. I think if you continue to try to talk with everyone, then it's only a matter of time before you make friends."

"I don't have that much time! It's already March, you know! I only have around a month left of my first year!"

It was probably some alteration (my desire to not be held back a year probably warped the world in some way), but it seemed I'd at least be able to advance a year next semester.

I wasn't quite sure, but I think you changed classes when you got to your second year. But rather than starting from zero, wouldn't it be better to already be close to a few people and then use that chance to expand your circle of friends?

It was absolutely necessary for me to make friends. For the sake of my happy school life.

But if I stumbled and messed up from square one, then I'd be alone until I graduated.

I really didn't want that.

"Anyway, for now, people are taking pity on me or something. So, no matter how much time passes, I don't think I can break the ice with people… so first, I'll become friends with someone like Kagami or whatever, and we can laugh and talk together! Not only will it be practice for being a normal high schooler, but everyone will think I'm a cheerful girl who smiles a lot and they'll stop being afraid to talk to me!"

"Not only is that roundabout, but I noticed you referred to me as 'Kagami or whatever'…"

Kagami did not look very agreeable right now, but I gripped her hand in mine with tears leaking from my eyes.

"It's fine if it's all just an act, but please just be my friend! I'm begging you! I don't want to eat alone at lunch anymore! When we pair up in English and gym, I don't want my partner to look at me anymore and go 'U-Umm, Tsukuyomi-san, n-nice to meet you…' like they're going to hurt me by breathing on me or something!"

Having no friends made it hard to breathe… to the point where I almost didn't want to come to school anymore.

"I want to sell myself as someone bright and cheerful from now on! I don't want to be the center of attention, but I just want to be a super normal high school girl who's leading a normal but fun high school life!"

Yes, this was the first step to that goal.

I would live a happy, completely normal life.

“But I really don’t know what to do… I haven’t had a single friend before today either! So I want to make this kind of a rehearsal with Kagami, and learn how to be ‘normal’! Kagami knows about my life, and I won’t cause too much trouble, so I think it’ll be a good chance to practice! You’ll be like a loaner friend before I get a real one!”

“Are you aware of what’s coming out of your mouth right now? To hear a human say that…”

Kagami let out a deep sigh and gloomily brushed my hand off.

“Well, I suppose school is a place for people to learn how to function in groups. I might be an adult who can accomplish everything perfectly fine by myself, but for an immature child like Sasami-san, being alone may very well be difficult.”

Was she trying to pick a fight with me?

“Neesan also gave me strict orders to keep watch over you since I’m in the same class, so I suppose if we become ‘friends,’ then we can do things together and that’s convenient for me as well.”

Kagami then puzzled for a bit.

“You still have the power of the Supreme God, right? If you wanted to, you could just alter the hearts of everyone around you and make them into your friends. Would that not be much simpler than going through the pain of trying and failing to talk with them?”

“Yeah, but I can’t do that.”

Although, that was pretty tempting. I was lazy at heart, after all.

But the power of the Supreme God was not “myself.”

It was something forced into me at the Tsukuyomi Shrine… at that awful place.

The Tsukuyomi miko was entrusted with these powers, and it was her duty and right to use them.

But I had chosen the path of laziness, and so the normal Tsukuyomi Sasami could not use these powers for her own convenience.

“I have to grow myself, or nothing will have changed.”

“……”

Kagami just gave me a blank stare. As usual, I had no idea what this girl could be thinking.

“Funyaa.”

She finally let out a yawn and buried her head in her pillow again.

“Well, I understand… let’s just make the best of it then. I look forward to our friendship, Sasami-san. And you should be considerate of your new friend’s feelings… and let her sleep.”

“O-Okay! Ehehe… we’re friends, got it! Good night!”

“So loud. Be quiet.”

“Okay! Ehehe~~…”

And thus,

On that day, I made my first friend.

@@@@@@

It was the next day.

Our lunch break had begun… the laughing voices of students with empty stomachs who had finished a hard morning's worth of work filled the classroom air.

"Kagami, Kagami."

By the time I saw Kagami, she was already asleep. I just waited for the right time before speaking up.

I watched Kagami's completely unremarkable black hair wave back and forth, while trying to send out a "Hey! Look at how cheerful I am! I'm not a gloomy girl with a dark past at all!" aura all around the classroom.

"It's lunchtime! Wake up, Kagami. We're gonna eat lunch together, remember?"

"Ugh, what is it this time…"

Kagami looked annoyed as she lifted her head, and stared at me as I almost jumped up and down with excitement.

"Ahh… right, we are 'friends,' was it? What an unnecessarily heavy burden this has turned out to be… lunch, did you say?"

Kagami words were devoid of almost any sense of friendship. She blinked a few times.

“To be honest, I can sustain my bodily functions without eating. So I would prefer to take lunch break as an opportunity to have a nice nap without anybody getting angry at me.”

Now that I thought about it, Kagami was kind of a spiritual robot or something like that, right?

“Umm, Sasami-san brought lunch from home, right? I’m going to sleep… so just please go ahead and eat. Here, you can push our desks up to each other and we can sit on opposite sides and face each other… it’ll be like the real thing.”

“One person eating and the other person is already asleep… that just sounds lonely…”

But hah.

I had expected Kagami to give me this kind of response.

“I didn’t bring any lunch today. There’s a cafeteria at this school, right? Let’s go together. It’s not like Kagami can’t eat anything, right? Let’s go eat together~~.”

“Uwah you’re so anno-… ah, let’s go together then. We’re friends, after all.”

I get the feeling she had started to say something really mean there…

We got up and went out of the classroom together, side by side.

Our school was pretty old, but it was built during good times, so the building itself was really beautiful.

The design was a bit old-fashioned, but there was plenty of light flowing in, and it was a comfortable place to be.

The first year, right-hand-side classroom and the cafeteria were both on the first floor, so they were pretty close together.

However, Kagami still swayed back and forth as she walked, seeming to have a hard time walking even that far.

“Just thinking that I’ll have to go to the cafeteria every day is making me nauseous…”

“In that case, what if I go and buy some sandwiches every day instead? I’ll buy Kagami’s portion too, of course! Or maybe I should bring lunch from home? I’ll make oniichan make some for Kagami too!”

“You sure don’t mind working sensei hard, Sasami-san… ahh, that strangely fancy-looking lunch that Sasami-san brings every day was made by sensei, wasn’t it…? Sensei might have a servant mentality, but if you exploit him too much, someday his love for you might run out, you know? He’ll start to dislike you, you know?”

“Ahaha, there’s no way oniichan would ever not like me.”

“But, making your biological older brother prepare lunch for you everyday isn’t really normal, is it? Weren’t you the one who wanted to live a normal life?”

Ouch. She hit a sore spot there.

“How about picking up after yourself once in a while? I can teach you how to cook, if you want… don’t always be a burden, and maybe even make sensei lunch sometimes. I’m sure that will make him happy.”

“Eh? Kagami can cook?”

“I’m in charge of all the housework in our house.”

“Ahh, I guess I can’t really see Tama or Tsurugi doing housework… but, that’s pretty amazing. Really have to respect you here. Laundry, cleaning the house… I’ve always depended on other people to do those things. I can’t do any of that myself. Can’t do any of those ordinary things…”

“I was like that in the past too.”

Kagami still looked pretty detached, but I could’ve sworn I saw just a faint trace of emotion in her eyes.

“I was a doll. Just a doll without a will of her own. And I was used like that… to efficiently exterminate irregularities. I was nothing more than a tool used for the purpose of humanity and the world. “

Kagami was a lump cut off from the Supreme God and had been taken in by an evil human organization.

She was a spiritual weapon.

Now that I thought about it, Kagami wasn’t unlike me. After all, I had been raised for the sole purpose of being the Tsukuyomi miko and making the world a better place for humans.

“But, neesan took me in… and I began a life that was so busy that I couldn’t even find the time to be bored anymore. In the midst of that, I discovered my own emerging humanity. It is still far from perfect, but for the first time, inside of me I found emotions and a heart. I was so happy… it was almost like a miracle. A simple doll like me had found happiness.”

Kagami smiled, and I noticed how pretty she looked when she did that.

It was the beauty of a doll that had been painstakingly crafted.

Or no, it was the beauty of a girl who had struggled with all her might every day to survive.

“I’m sure Sasami-san is the same. After all, she’s been blessed with much more than I have been. You’re a human overflowing with emotions, and you’re trying hard to improve yourself. Your happiness… your salvation… it will naturally come. And in the near future.”

At that point, Kagami coughed, and awkwardly turned away from me.

“That was quite out-of-character for me… my tongue must be rotting. I want to vomit.”

Wow, way to ruin the moment.

“Is this the cafeteria?”

We found ourselves arriving at our destination as we talked.

I was surprised how much time could fly when you weren’t alone.

The Konohana Sakuya Academy cafeteria felt like a modern eating hall and was quite stylishly designed.

A bunch of seats were lined up in a row.

The menu was written in classy cursive.

We could see the neatly-trimmed garden outside the huge windows and the cheerful faces of a lot of students in their reddish-pink school uniforms.

“Umm… what should we do?”

“You buy a food ticket from this vending machine here, and hand it to that woman over there.”

Kagami didn’t hesitate at all as she led me around. Had she eaten in the cafeteria before?

I nonchalantly followed after her, when I suddenly realized something.

There was a wall of people in the middle of the cafeteria, and I could hear a ruckus coming from over there.

“Come on, come on!” “Ugh, my little Cosmo (i.e. stomach)…!” “Don’t lose! This isn’t happening! You can’t let this happen!” “It’s ten against one… why can’t we win?! Is our school’s chibi teacher a complete monster…?!” “N-No more…!” It was a bunch of teachers.

It looked like they were having an eating contest.

Gulp gulp gulp.

Tsurugi was at the center of it all, scarfing down her beef rice bowl like it was water.

“Fwahh~~! Old woman, I need more over here!”

Tsurugi was ecstatic, a few grains of rice still stuck to her cheek.

There were an uncountable number of bowls heaped up in front of her, hiding the aftermath of what was a fierce battle.

Heaps of groaning teachers with their full bellies exposed to open air were crumbled next to her, while my brother was tearing into a beef rice bowl while using the bowl to hide his face.

But, no matter how weird he was, my brother was still a normal human and had a stomach with a finite volume, and he soon flopped down onto the floor, face up. The bowl was still stuck to his face.

“Ahh, Tsukuyomi sunk!” “Y-You idiot! Tsurugi-chan promised to kiss us on the cheek if we won!” “Fufu… you fools… everything will be mine!” “Agh! The bowls that Tsurugi-sensei finished with! You want to go for an indirect kiss, don’t you?!” “You bastard! Do you intend to violate the Tsurugi Love Alliance Treaty?!” “Chibi-sensei’s saliva would be wasted on you lot! Give it to me!” “I don’t like to fight. I just like to win!!” The teachers began another ugly battle over the bowls.

“Ahh, I’m so full.”

Tsurugi ignored the chaos developing around her and just picked her teeth with a toothpick like some middle-aged man.

Kagami and I just stood there, watching with sad, sad eyes as our school’s fun-loving teachers screwed around as usual. Tsurugi finally seemed to notice us, and happily raised her hand in greeting.

“Fufufufu! My my, isn’t this an odd pair to behold! You guys eating in the cafeteria today too? Let your sister treat you! All the other teachers promised to pay for my meals from now on if I won this eating conte-“

Tsurugi was happily going on and on, but then her eyes widened.

“Kagami, watch out! Behind you!”

But the very split second before Tsurugi could finish that sentence…

A young-looking cafeteria employee (the one Tsurugi had nevertheless been calling “old woman”) came over carrying the extra helping of food that Tsurugi had asked for, but she suddenly seemed to trip on pure air.

It was unnatural.

It was almost like something had pulled her leg from under her…

“Uhyah?!”

The old woman let out a scream, while the tray she was holding, as well as the beef rice bowl, miso soup, and pickled vegetables on top of it went flying into the air.

Swwshhh.

And of all places, everything poured right onto Kagami.

“……”

Kagami’s face and uniform were completely soiled by the beef, rice, raw egg, and all the other food. She fell as silent as a ghost, and turned to look at the old lady who was pale and shaking on the floor.

“U-Umm… s-sorry…”

The old lady was cowering, but it’s not like she had any ill intent, so Kagami let out a sigh.

“No need to apologize. It was an accident… please excuse me Sasami-san, but I have to go wash this uniform and change into my jersey… please eat lunch by yourself.”

After leaving off with that, Kagami walked off in her usual indifferent way, devoid of even the faintest traces of emotion.

“……”

Tsurugi watched her little sister, a rare look of grimness in her eyes.

Chapter 9: Red Moon[1]

It was after school on the same day.

I was lounging around in the Production Club clubroom waiting for my brother to get off work.

After I killed some time, my brother came to pick me up, and we went home together.

When I didn't have enough energy to make it back home, my brother let me ride on his bicycle with him.

On those days, we would stop by the shopping district on the way home and eat diner.

Today, we were at a rotary sushi restaurant.

"I see. Friends with Kagami-san…"

I was sitting side-by-side with my brother at the counter and telling him about what had happened today.

Perhaps I just wanted to tell my brother that so he could hear me being happy.

"I might get a little lonely, but I think this is a good thing. Kagami is pretty on top of things, and she can help you study too."

[1] The word is pronounced as "red moon," but the kanji used literally means "moon the color of life." I decided to go with the pronunciation for the translation here.

“Yeah… I mean, looks like some alteration made it so I can at least not get held back next term, but that doesn’t change the fact that none of the knowledge I need is in my head.”

To be honest, I was completely hopeless when it came to studying.

After all, I was always just locked up in my room playing around.

It wasn’t like I was all-knowing and all-powerful.

“Ahh, oniichan, get the king salmon. Also the sea bream and some of the eel there.”

I pointed at the sushi as it lazily rolled past us, while my brother swiftly grabbed everything I pointed to.

“I can’t eat that much, so split it in half. In half, okay?”

“Okaay~~.”

“Only put soy sauce on the fish. If you get it on the rice I’ll kill you.”

“I know, I know.”

“I hate wasabi. Take it off, take it off.”[2]

“Of course… say ‘ahhh’~~.”

“Ahhh…”

[2] For those of you who might be confused, in authentic Japanese sushi restaurants the wasabi comes already put on the fish. Usually, you don’t have to add any more to your soy sauce.

Chomp. Chew chew.

Hm. Delicious.

“Kagami’s test scores are really high, but it doesn’t seem like she really takes notes. I always see her sleeping during class too, so how are her grades that high?”

“I heard that Kagami-san can memorize entire textbooks by just seeing them once. Also, arithmetic on seven-digit numbers is trivial for her to do in her head; so, her natural mental abilities should be much higher than that of a normal human’s.”

The other people in the restaurant were watching my brother and my perfectly-normal dinner ritual with strange looks on their faces, but I didn’t mind them and just continued to fill my stomach.

“Oniichan, more tea please. Tea.”

“Of course.”

“It’s hot, so blow on it. Blow on it.”

“Be careful to not burn your tongue. Open your mouth.”

“Nnnn…”

Sip sip.

Ahh, you gotta have green tea with sushi, after all.

“Well, it’s not like I made friends with her so I could get her to teach me stuff like that though. I’m just happy to be her friend.

I've met and talked to other people online, but this is my first real-life friend."

I smiled as my brother wiped my mouth with a paper napkin.

And then, I thought back.

Thought back to my lonely, lonely childhood.

To that time when I tried so hard and struggled through every day.

Everyone had placed all their hopes on me while I was young and either distanced themselves from me or came at me with scandalous intentions, trying to take advantage of me.

I was surrounded by adults, so it was beyond hope for me to be able to play with someone my own age.

I would train, sometimes collapse exhausted into bed, and repeat.

It was a life devoid of any variety.

But, humans were never meant to live lonely lives.

Children want to play with other children, and there were times when my patience hit its breaking point.

I would escape from my harsh training, from the shrine, and descend upon the town outside.

But my little child's feet could only carry me so far, and all the neighboring towns were under the patronage of the Tsukuyomi Shrine, so the other children around feared me and treated me like some monster.

Or rather, they feared me like some sort of God and didn't try to approach me.

I would call out to them, but they would ignore me and run away.

Sometimes, they would even throw stones at me.

Knocked down and in tears, I would return crying to the shrine…

And of course, my mother would be there waiting for me.

My mother was a strict person, worthy of fear.

But she was also a proud, beautiful, amazing person worthy of respect.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

As I came home sobbing, my mother would be there in her usual miko garb, without any hint of a smile on her face.

--- Sasami.

She always sounded more sad than angry.

--- A Tsukuyomi Miko must not make any friends.

She would stroke my head and give me an awkward hug.

@@@@@@

It took us less than an hour to finish eating.

My brother straddled his bicycle which he had parked outside, and I clung to the bike behind him. It was a two-person riding style I had become quite used to.

It was still February, so the world was darkening around us.

The moon lingered overhead, looking like a mass of entrails in the sky.

“Ahh, I’m so full.”

We had just eaten, so both of us were moving pretty sluggishly.

I sat on the luggage rack on the back of the bike, feeling a light breeze tickle my cheeks.

“But, oniichan… I know I usually don’t eat too much, but you ate pretty little today too.”

“I had a huge eating contest with Tsurugi-sensei and the others at lunch… also, just watching Sasami-san be so happy is enough to fill my belly.”

“Hmm, well that doesn’t cost any money, so that’s good I guess.”

Now that I thought back, there was an incident in the rotary sushi when my brother got jealous that I was talking so much about Kagami and jumped on the table half-naked, putting sushi around his nipples and asking me in a deranged voice to “Eat me! I’m the one who can love Sasami-san the most!”

Ugh, my brother is such an idiot…

He should just go die.

“Hm?”

As I talked with my brother like I usually did, I suddenly felt a chill.

“Hmm…?”

We had already left the bustling shopping district and were riding through the sparsely-populated residential district.

The streetlamps illuminated our way eerily like a row of jack-o-lanterns. And I felt that something was off.

The town looked just as plain and normal as it always did.

But…

I smelled blood.

“What’s wrong, Sasami-san?”

My brother might not have any ability to detect spiritual phenomena, but he was still very sensitive to my own changes in mood. He quickly brought the bike to a screeching halt and looked at me with worry on his face.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have gotten on the bike right after eating? Are you feeling a bit sick?”

“No, it’s just… oniichan?!”

I suddenly felt a bit dizzy, got off the bike, and almost leapt to face the side.

Nobody would usually give this normal town scenery a second look. But today, enshrouded in twilight…

Illuminated by the streetlights and the strangely red-glowing moon…

-

Was a sitting, blood-stained Kagami.

-

She was squatting down in the shadow of a street lamp.

Her black hair, pale skin, and school uniform… all of it was stained here and there the color of blood.

Her long, labored breaths turned white in the chilled air, belying her exhaustion.

I blinked my eyes again and again.

I had no idea what was going on… but this wasn't normal at all.

"Kagami?!"

I yelled out. Kagami seemed to notice me and lifted her head.

"Ahh-…"

This situation was just so unnatural.

"I was sleeping."

She said the same thing she always said.

I quickly rushed up to Kagami and reached out to her.

“Are you okay, Kagami?! What happened?! Those wounds look serious!”

“Oh hello, Sasami-san… how strange to see you here. Right, you do live around here, don’t you? Why are you walking around all alone at this hour? A girl your age shouldn’t be-”

“Kagami-san?!”

At that point, my brother also came running over. Kagami blinked a few times.

“Oh hello, sensei… ah, Sasami-san is still in her uniform? Are you on your way home from school?”

Why was she acting like nothing was wrong?

“It doesn’t matter what we’re doing… Kagami, are you okay? W-We need to get you to a hospital… oniichan, what should we do?! Kagami is…”

“No need to worry about me.”

Kagami didn’t even pay me a single glance as she unsteadily got back up to her feet.

She clearly had wounds all over her body, but her face was still perfectly calm.

“Unlike you, we’re built to be a bit more durable, so these wounds will heal soon enough. Ah, it’s already so late… I have to get back or neesan will worry.”

“Hey, Kagami?!”

Kagami brushed me to the side and tried to walk off down the road.

Of course, I couldn’t just leave her alone like that, and grabbed her by the hand.

“What happened, Kagami? Let me know… we’re friends, aren’t we?”

She couldn’t have possibly received those wounds from a simple trip or fall.

“What does this have to do with you?”

Kagami sounded irritated as she spat that out while rubbing away a few bloodstains on her body with the back of her hand.

“Also… wasn’t the agreement that we would be friends only during school? You want to learn how to be a ‘normal’ human, and I’m just someone to practice with, correct? I’m not sure what I misunderstood about those terms, but really it’d be annoying for me if you get too clingy.”

Kagami knocked my hand away and swept a hand through her hair, looking rather annoyed.

“I didn’t have a choice but to accept you as my friend because neesan told me to. But other than that, I would appreciate it if you keep our interaction to a minimum. This is just a piece of advice… but if you would like to live a ‘normal’ life, then you’d best not become involved with *people like us.*”

She was right.

I was just a normal human who housed the power of the Supreme God.

And she… was different.

She wasn’t misunderstanding anything…

“Kagami.”

I looked down at the floor, holding back tears, and just called her name… like some small child, I just called her name.

Kagami didn't answer, but just turned her back on me and began to slowly walk away.

--- Ahaha. Guess I spoiled the mood a little, huh?

--- Sorry for talking to you when you were in a bad spot.

--- Bye bye. I'll see ya at school tomorrow.

I should've just said something carefree like that.

"… Kagami!"

But all I could do was shout her name.

And like that, Kagami left.

Chapter 10: Blindfolded Tag

Two weeks passed by quickly.

And I found myself in a wholly unwanted situation.

I had expected that in around three days, I would've learned skills like how to be a good friend and how to be a normal high school girl. I would begin to give off the impression of being a cheerful girl, and by a week in I would've shaken off the label of being a girl who was supposed to be pitied.

After that, it should've been quick work to make friends other than Kagami, and then I could live a wonderful life and experience things I never could've experienced before as a shut-in.

Well, things just didn't always go how you wanted them to go.

It was natural that things wouldn't always work out in my life, especially since I had chosen not to misuse the power of the Supreme God.

There was only a bit more than a week left in my first year of high school, and I began to count the days left until closing ceremony. But rather than being panicked, I was a bit bewildered.

Huh?

What?

Shouldn't it have gone a bit better than this…?

I should've been happier… should've been having more fun…

This was strange. Just strange. Also, pretty irritating.

Compared to my little room at home, where every little thing went exactly how I wanted it to, this was just a completely different experience.

It was pretty natural that not everything would work out as planned.

But still, I was just astonished.

Was this reality? Was this what it meant to live a “real” life?

I see. I guess I underestimated this “real life” stuff a bit.

Ehehe, my bad.

I’ll just give it time, try to learn from my mistakes, and once I get used to this stuff a bit more…

Then everything will work out, right?

“Kagami.”

I was optimistic. Or maybe I was just averting my eyes from reality. Either way, because of that, I didn’t try hard.

What would happen would happen.

With time and experience, I would become able to accomplish my goals too.

I believed in that so much that I just ceased all thought and didn’t try to get better.

Or maybe I was just afraid.

Afraid of a reality that wouldn’t listen to a single little thing I said.

“Um, Kagami.”

It was after school.

Someone had sloppily written “closing ceremony, 6 days left!” on the board under where the date had been written. Those words pierced through my chest.

When you went up a year, all the classes changed around. In other words, we had less than a week before we wouldn’t be able to see all these same people in the same classroom anymore. Because of that, a sense of end-of-the-year loneliness drifted through the room.

But I wasn’t really feeling the same way as everyone else.

By this point, I was supposed to have stopped being an outsider…

I was supposed to have taken a step forwards, have reached out to the other students, and have found my voice.

But I guess that was all just a delusion? Maybe… I was only pretending to try hard?

Could it be that I hadn’t changed at all?

“Funyaa.”

When I shook her by the shoulder, Kagami looked wearily up at me. As usual, she had been sleeping.

“Sasami-san, what is it?”

She really didn’t look like she wanted to be talking with me.

I see. She was tired of playing along with this friendship thing, wasn't she? Sorry…

I gave a bit of a start at her words and just looked at her. I had completely lost confidence in myself.

Even after that day I had found her completely bloodied and collapsed, even after she had told me off with her cold words, her attitude towards me had not changed.

If I spoke to her, she would respond normally.

But I felt there was a sense of distance between us, and my attempts to socialize with her became more and more awkward.

No, that's not right.

We were friends.

Even if it was only at school, Kagami was my friend. So…

"Um, here."

If I just put more effort into being friendly with her, if I tried my best, then I'm sure I would be able to find happiness.

But, I didn't know in what way I should try my best.

"I-I won some movie tickets from this magazine contest…"

It was from a shoujo manga magazine that I had always read.

Maybe it was because of the power of the Supreme God, but I often won things like this.

“If you want, maybe today… we can go together?”

“……”

Kagami yawned, and stared at the tickets I was handing out to her.

There was a bit of a silence before Kagami began to mutter a response, her face not showing an ounce of emotion.

“I apologize. I already have plans today.”

“Ah, I see.”

That’s kind of what I was expecting her response would be.

But I wouldn’t give up.

“Well, when do you think you’ll be free? Do you want to hang out somewhere? Even if it’s not a movie, I don’t really know my way around town very well yet, so maybe you can show me-“

“I apologize. Can you please stop asking me these things for a while?”

Kagami’s emotionless voice knocked right into me, and I felt myself tearing up.

“Um… am I… annoying you?”

She really looked like she was tired of me.

That’s what I thought.

I see.

I had gone out of my way to force Kagami to be my friend.

I had told her it was just temporary, that I was just using her as a filler friend, that this was just practice… but all of that was just me hiding my embarrassment. And even then, I had to wring out every ounce of my courage to ask her that.

But Kagami didn't know any of that.

She had agreed to be my friend just because she felt a sense of duty to protect me.

I didn't want that… I felt tears begin to flow out my eyes.

I was like a baby throwing a tantrum.

What the hell was this…?

"No."

Kagami didn't even twitch.

"Whether Sasami-san is there or not makes no difference to me. Your existence has absolutely no bearing on my daily life. Perhaps you're being a bit overly sensitive, Sasami-san?"

Kagami's slow, leisurely words sucked my life right out as she stood up.

She took her schoolbag in one hand, and passed by my side as I began to sob, not a single hint of lingering affection on her face.

"……"

She stopped there and seemed to hesitate, opening and shutting her mouth a few times.

But then she just looked down at the ground and just mumbled indifferently.

“Well then, until tomorrow.”

“… I don’t care…”

I screamed out in desperate.

“I don’t care anymore!”

Exactly who was I yelling at, and what did I mean?

I rubbed my eyes as I thrust Kagami away from me and flew out of the classroom.

I ran and ran and ran, my breath growing heavier and heavier, but I never got anywhere at all.

@@@@@@

I had run way more than I had in a long time, so I suddenly felt too exhausted to go home and went to rest a bit in the Production Club clubroom.

I took out my cell phone and called my brother, but he told me that today of all days he was stuck in a staff meeting and would be a bit late, so I spent the next few minutes showering him with abuse to relieve stress.

My brother seemed a bit worried and offered to slip out of his meeting to go home with me, but I didn't want him to get fired either, so I mustered my strength to go home alone.

The lights had been turned off already to conserve energy, so I just weakly shuffled across the dark hallway.

Konohana Sakuya Academy wasn't known for having a lot of active clubs, so there weren't many people around at this time. I began to change out of my school shoes near the building entrance when I suddenly noticed something.

Kagami was there.

She was walking along with a classmate of ours who I had seen before.

Now that I remembered, she did say that she had other plans.

I had thought that she had had some really important plans.

But what the hell? She was just walking along with another classmate, and didn't seem to be in a rush at all.

I felt my mind cloud over.

Everything went white, I saw sparks flicker in front of my eyes, and my breathing became labored.

"… Nnghh…"

I had just assumed…

I had just assumed that Kagami had no friends.

That she was like me.

That it would be easy to make friends with her. But all of that had been wishful thinking.

Kagami had her own plans from day to day, probably had fun with her own friends every day, and I was just interfering with all that. Kagami was just trying her best to put up with me.

"… can't take this anymore…"

I had stopped being a shut-in, tried my best, and ventured outside.

I decided to live a normal life, to stand on my own two feet, and to become happy someday… without any real reason, I believed I would be able to do all that.

But, I had been wrong.

I had made a big mistake.

"I can't… take this anymore… not anymore…"

At some point, Kagami and the other girl had disappeared.

I slowed down my breathing and hurried home as fast as possible, trying to avoid looking at anybody.

@@@@@@

I was breaking down.

For outside observers, that probably was a pretty pathetic sight.

I wasn't wounded at all.

It's not like I had been fatally stabbed or anything, and I was living a pretty convenient life.

Everyone around me was nice to me, and I lived in a prosperous country free of war.

It would be selfish of me to claim I was unlucky.

But, I still hated this.

I had been protected and coddled my entire life, so this tiniest of setbacks was enough to break my heart.

All it took to push me to my limit was to get rejected by Kagami and have some cold words thrown at me.

I was acting like no more than a spoiled child.

Tears streaked down my face as I walked.

Walked home alone.

If I had gone home like that, and had gone back to my room with its familiar warmth and peacefulness, then I might've decided to never try hard again, and then… I might've shut myself in once again.

But I was a spoiled child.

When I was in trouble or depressed, there was always someone who came to my aid.

-

"Kyahahahaha~~!"

-

Before I realized it, I was walking next to the park near my house.

The sun had almost set already, but there were still some neighborhood elementary schoolers playing happily in the park.

They had left their backpacks on the ground and were running around.

In the middle of that group was Tama – the third Yagami Sister, whose height allowed her to tower over all the other kids.

Tama had such a nice body that it was very difficult to imagine that she was an elementary schooler. To add to that, she was wearing light clothing even though it was winter and for some reason was also blindfolded, making everything seem all the more sketchy.

"Oni, oni, I'm over here~~!"[1]

"I'm snapping my fingers~~! Follow me~~!"

"Waaiii~~! Where are you all? Tama is the oni! Are you over here? Tama is going to eat you~~!"

[1] Oni is a kind of demon from Japanese folklore, and is also the word used to indicate the person who's "it" in a game of tag.

“Gyah, she caught me!”

“Hm hm… this smell… this must be Sacchin! Thanks for the meal~~!”

“Gyah?! Don’t *really* bite me, Tama-chan!”

“Ahh, Satou only?! That’s so not faaaaiirr~~.”

“Eat me too!”

“Tama-chan with a blindfold… Tama-chan with a blindfold…!!”

For some reason, they ended up ignoring the rules for blindfolded tag and all the boys began to just pile on top of the defenseless Tama.

“Howawawa…? What’s this? Ahh, don’t touch Tama there… ehehe, the oni lost! But Tama is the lowest oni around! Even if you beat Tama, there’s still the second and the third oni… kyahaha! Don’t eat that! Tama is the one who’s gonna eat *you*~~!”

Hm, Tama had such a nice body that I really couldn’t see this as anything more than elementary schoolers sexually harassing a pretty older lady…

I think there was a novel about that kind of thing once…

“Hm? Oh? I smell Mamarin!”

As the prepubescent kids piled on Tama got more and more confused by this excitement they had never felt before, Tama energetically stood up and shook them all off.

She seemed to figure out where I was, and steadily jumped at me without removing her blindfold.

“Waaii~~! It’s Tama! Umm, Tama, you know, Tama is too good at normal tag so we played blindfolded tag! Tama is really fast! She’s the fastest in the class!”

Tama continued to go on and on about herself while hugging me tight.

“Hmm~~? Mamarin, it’s you, right? Why isn’t Mamarin talking at all? Maybe this isn’t Mamarin…? Hmm, well… *lick.* No, this is Mamarin’s taste~~!”

Don’t lick me, dammit.

“Hm? Is Mamarin crying?”

Maybe I tasted a bit salty, but Tama seemed bewildered and then took off her blindfold in a hurry.

Both my eyes were red and my eyelids were swollen.

There was no way I could lie my way out of this one.

“Ah, sorry, I have plans,” I spurted out before trying to run away. But Tama held me back with her incredible arm strength.

“Wait, Mamarin! Wanna play with Tama?”

She sounded desperate.

It was almost scary.

“Tsurugi-nee told Tama… she told Tama that when you’re sad, it’s really dangerous. So let’s play? When you’re sad, you end up thinking about lots of things, right? And when Tama and Mamarin and other people like us think too much, then all the gods around us try to make us feel better and warp the world! So… so…!”

At this point, even Tama was close to tears, and she pleaded with me with all her might.

“When Mamarin cries, it makes Tama’s chest go all tight… and Tama is an idiot, so she doesn’t know what to do… but Tama likes it when Mamarin smiles, so…”

I hadn’t fallen far enough that I would forcibly reject this pure wish coming from Tama.

And so, I played with the elementary schoolers until the crows began to cry.

@@@@@@

Before I realized it, the sun had already completely set.

The elementary schoolers all happily went their way back home, but unlike them I didn’t have a limitless store of energy, so I just collapsed exhausted onto a park bench.

I… really exerted myself a bit too much back there…

But it was the first time I’ve done something like that.

Tag. Hide-and-go-seek. The “kick-the-can” game…

They were really common ways to play.

But I didn’t have much experience, and you could say I was even more of a child than the elementary schoolers.

But in any case.

I. Am. So. Tired.

“That was really fun, Mamarin~~.”

For some reason, Tama had stayed behind with me, and was sitting next to me flapping her feet.

She suddenly started staring at a cart selling stone-grilled yams with desire in her eyes, so I let her run and buy some.

Tama gripped the coins I had given her tightly and happily went on her journey, returning with a piping hot yam.

“Wai, waaiii~~. Mamarin is so nice~~. Yams, yams~~ yamajamayam~~.”

“Ahh, thanks Tama.”

As Tama began to enthusiastically sing her mysterious song, I suddenly felt like I wanted to tease her a bit. I took the bag with the yam in it and began to eat it all by myself.

“Hm, this is delicious.”

“…? …?”

Tama didn’t seem to understand that she was being teased, and just stared at me with eyes filled with hope.

Ugh, what a letdown.

It was starting to hurt getting stared at by those pure, large eyes, so I split the yam into two and crammed one half into Tama's unnecessarily large mouth.

"Hng… *chew chew chew.* More please!"

"So fast! Sorry, Tama. The other half is mine… kyah! Don't try to steal it right out of my mouth with yours! You might end up stealing something much more important than the yam!"

Tama began to inch closer and closer to my face with hers, while I tried to push her away with all my strength.

In the end, I just reluctantly gave the rest of the yam to Tama. "Eat it a bit more slowly this time," I warned her.

"So good, so good~~."

Tama sat next to me, her face beaming, as I looked up at the night sky.

Today was about to become the worst day in my life, but because of Tama I felt much better.

I suddenly realized that I didn't feel nearly as stressed as I had.

But, that didn't mean anything was solved.

There was still the problem that my relationship with Kagami was still really awkward. And the blame for that most likely rested with me.

I had to change. I had to grow up.

But… I had no idea how.

“Let’s play sometime again, Mamarin. Tama and the others are always in the park.”

Nah, I played with you guys today because I got a bit too into it… but normally it’d be a bit embarrassing for a girl my age to play with elementary schoolers.

But when I looked at Tama and saw the expression of a girl who couldn’t imagine in her wildest dreams that someone would reject her idea, I could only manage to say “Ahh… okay, if I feel like it then.”

I wiped Tama’s mouth with a handkerchief (all the while she kept on going “Nghh…” and “Nyahaha…” and making other annoying sounds).

“Hey, Tama…”

I felt a sense of powerlessness and a slight bit of envy filtering in and out of my chest.

“How do you make friends?”

I didn’t know.

Asking an elementary schooler to teach me that was a bit pathetic, but at this point I was prepared to rely on thin air if I had to.

There were mountains and mountains of worthless knowledge stored in textbooks and on the internet, but the important things in real life were like treasures that had to be hunted for by each and every person themselves. Reality’s difficulty level was way too high.

And sometimes, you just had to hold down your shame and ask people who were better than you for help.

Even if she was like that… Tama was a god, after all.

“Hm? Why are you asking Tama that?”

Tama seemed genuinely puzzled.

It was almost like she didn’t understand what my question meant.

I held back my embarrassment as I stood up and bought two oolong teas at a nearby vending machine.

Eating these yams had clogged up my throat a bit.

“But Tama has so many friends. I have no friends… so I mean… it’s a bit weird but… I guess I’m jealous.”

“But Mamarin is Kagami-nee’s friend, isn’t she?”

My heart sped up.

Tama didn’t notice that I had stiffened, but just continued happily.

“When we eat dinner, Kagami-nee didn’t talk about anything before… but now she talks a lot about school! Talks about eating lunch together, getting teamed up with Mamarin in gym or English class… Kagami-nee’s face never has any ee-moh-shuns on it, but she’s really happy! Tama knows!”

Happy…

She was?

“Kagami-nee said ‘I made a friend today’ two weeks ago, and she made us a feast, you know? Kagami-nee seems a bit sad now though, so Mamarin, take good care of her, ‘kay? Kagami-nee tries too hard sometimes and makes Tama worry.”

If Tama was worried about you, you were probably doing something horribly wrong…

So Kagami had made a friend…

Ah, so she really did think of me as a friend…

“Tama and the others are gods, so we’re always not sure.”

Tama looked right at me with that surprisingly beautiful face of hers.

“We’re gods, so sometimes if we want something we’ll alter the world so it’s better for us. Even if we didn’t mean to. Humans have low divinities, so if Tama wanted to, she could alter them and force them to be her friend. So it’s scary.”

Humans prayed to the gods.

They entrusted their wishes and hopes to them.

In that case, who exactly should the gods depend on when they were troubled?

Did they have to solve all their problems on their own?

In a sense, maybe the gods lived much stricter lives than humans.

“Even if Tama makes friends, and plays with them a lot, and they tell Tama that they love her… maybe that’s just because *Tama made them say that.* That’s scary… Tama is always scared… but Mamarin and Kagami-nee are both gods. So you two have to be true friends, not because of some power… Tama is jealous.”

When I handed her the oolong tea, Tama unscrewed the cap and gulped the tea down.

A little splash of tea flew through the air.

“Ahh… and you two are real friends, so sometimes you’re gonna hurt each other a lot. Kagami-nee also has been crying a lot and has been worrying about something. Tama is worried, but she’s also jealous.”

Tama walked over to me and gripped my hand softly.

And then, even though she was a god herself, she looked at me as if praying.

“Please take care of Kagami-nee.”

Her words got through to me… and I finally understood everything.

“Everything should be over soon. Just wait, or if you can go help her. Kagami-nee is trying her best… *everything will be finished at latest by the end of the school year,* she said. Tama and Tsurugi-nee wanted to help, but she said no. *Sasami-san is* my *friend, so this is something that I have to do*, she said…”

Chapter 11: Personal Notes From the Yagami Sisters 2

Preparations for battle are fully complete.

Talisman Machine Gun, downloaded. Spiritual Missiles, input. Imperial Flame Shield Kagutsuchi,[1] set at Level B. Yata no Kagami, placed in state of high alert. Vulnerable factors and damaged functions, uninstalled. Heart and emotions, placed into sleep mode.

According to radar readings, if my divinity is 100, then the evil gods stationed at Konohana Sakuya Academy have divinities of 2, 4, 6, 11, 12… I wouldn't lose to any of these in a one-on-one fight, but things are a bit more troublesome because they've all teamed up. If I remember that today will be the last cleanup session, then things feel much easier.

The school's closing ceremonies are in six days.

We only have one more week to be first-year high school students.

I might not be able to make it in time. I might be a god, but I was a rather bad one. After all, I couldn't grant anybody's prayers. But someone had sent me a prayer. Someone had wished for something from me. Or no, rather… someone had asked me to do something as their friend.

So I would exhaust every effort.

In the distant past, I had been a doll.

I had been a doll without a will of my own.

[1] Reference to a flame deity in Japanese folklore, famous for burning his mother to death during childbirth.

However… I had found a family. And maybe a friend as well. That friend was a thoughtless idiot, a mannerless girl who didn't even understand the words that came out of her own mouth, and she was quite irritating… but if her wish was to live a normal, average school life and to make normal friends, then I would remove everything that stood in her path.

I didn't want to be thanked. I was simply just happy.

I would make it so she didn't have to shoulder too much guilt or regret. While she wasn't looking, I would take it upon myself to work in the shadows for my own satisfaction.

I would bloody myself countless times for the sake of 'having an average, normal life.'

Like Pinocchio, I would cross the turbulent seas with my ridiculous desires held under my arms.

I was a god, so nobody else would listen to my prayers. Everything depended on my own actions.

But while a person like me with such a troublesome history wouldn't be permitted to pray…

If my prayers could come true, then gods above, I…

Chapter 12: Together with the You Inside the Mirror

By the time I had arrived at Konohana Sakuya Academy, everything had already ended.

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I have to say, I was being surprisingly carefree about this situation. However, you could say I just didn't have very much confidence in my idea, in the conclusion I had reached, so those doubts made me decide to ask Kagami about what was going on.

I couldn't get through to her on the phone or through text, so I ended up going back with Tama to their apartment (it was near our house, in a building called the Corpse Ahakihara)[1]. However, even though it was already pitch black outside, it seemed that Kagami had yet to come home.

Tsurugi was there but didn't seem to want to butt in.

"Ahh, I'm kinda bad with youthful crap like this, so can you just go handle it for me? Thanks."

She just left me with that nonsensical message while brushing her teeth and chased me away.

"Don't stay out too late, okay?!" "Hmph!" Tsurugi tossed that warning at Tama as we left, and at that point I decided to stop running around from place to place.

I had reached a conclusion.

[1] Probably a reference to a river in Japanese mythology, the Ahakihara, in which Izanagi purified himself after seeing his wife as a corpse in the Underworld. Also, most likely a pun on Akihabara, the anime mecca of Tokyo.

If my line of thinking wasn't mistaken, then Kagami was at Konohana Sakuya Academy.

We were "only friends at school," right Kagami?

"Ugh…"

The empty schoolhouse at night looked a bit like a haunted house, but after I sneaked in, I realized that "haunted house" would be putting it too lightly.

I smelled blood. Enough to make me choke.

I don't know if it was some kind of alteration or something, but there was nothing blocking my path. Neither the school gate, nor the glass door at the top of the entrance stairs were locked, and I entered the building with no resistance.

I changed into my indoor shoes at the shoebox, and walked through the quiet hallways.

I felt dizzy.

This was the same uneasy feeling I got back when I had been a shut-in and tried to walk outside.

It was the nausea I got when exposed to a world that had been horribly and selfishly twisted by the other gods and their alterations.

It felt like I was wearing glasses that were way too strong for me and trying to walk across the deck of a swaying ship.

Everything I saw, everything I heard, everything I touched…

None of it made sense. It all just twirled around me in an eddy of ill will, assaulting me.

This was wrong.

Anything and everything was wrong.

My swirling emotions flickered nauseatingly in front of my eyes.

“Ugheeehhhh…”

I couldn’t help dashing into a nearby bathroom and vomiting everything into the western-style toilet inside.

“Ueeh, ehh, oehhhhhh…”

After my stomach had been completely emptied, I stood up again.

I washed my mouth at the fountain and smacked myself on the cheek, trying to get myself back into the game.

I had to try my best.

I had to try my best…

“……”

I felt myself completely drained after having vomited, but there was no real problem.

I went out of the bathroom and walked around the school, checking to make sure that everything was over.

And I found many strange monsters lying about, looking completely out-of-place in this normal schoolhouse.

There were a lot of monsters which just looked like huge versions of animals or reptiles, but there were also ones that looked like a huge eyeball in the middle of a pile of meat. I also saw a vaulting horse and a set of hurdles which had sprouted a pair of arms and legs. There really wasn't any consistency.

These were the gods.

There were also some that were still moving.

I was desperately trying to control the power of the Supreme God, so maybe they saw me as just a normal girl, but some of them made scary faces and came at me menacingly.

Ridiculous.

Did they not know who I was?

"Don't…"

I tried not to get angry.

No matter how childish of an emotion it was, I had to prioritize *that* over everything else.

If I couldn't control the power of the Supreme God, then the world would twist.

If I got angry, got sad, got happy…

I had to put all those emotions under my control and manage them to minimize any effect I might have on the world.

That was my duty.

But.

“Don’t… make me… angry…”

Mustering every ounce of patience I had, I managed to get that one sentence out.

But with just that, all the gods around me vanished.

They had run away.

They were frightened of the imperial wrath of the Supreme God.

“Now that I think about it, this was all pretty simple.”

I talked while I walked.

I had no idea where Kagami was.

She might’ve already gone home.

I wanted to see her, but I didn’t know how I was supposed to look her in the face.

But, I needed to tell her how I felt.

I wanted to apologize… and at least tell her the truth.

Tell the truth to my clumsy, awkward friend.

“It was the same with the Valentine’s Day Tragedy, but all the gods want to curry favor with the Supreme God. After all, the more the Supreme God values you and likes you, the higher your divinity becomes.”

All the gods obey the Supreme God.

The Supreme God was the king of the nation, so to speak.

To the other gods, that was the absolute rule. And so, their ambitions and attempts at flattery would be remarkable.

But, right now, the Supreme God was an idiot like me.

I had forgotten the fact that I had the power of the Supreme God, and wished for a friend.

And then, I chose a single girl, Yagami Kagami, as my friend.

At that point, the gods became jealous.

To be the only person receiving the affection of the King was a recipe for disaster.

Even human history has proven that point over and over again.

That poor soul who was chosen as the Supreme God's object of affection would be showered with the jealousy, harassment, and interference from everyone around her.

I'm sure Kagami had been beaten down while I wasn't looking.

I just never noticed.

I remembered the old lady from the cafeteria, who had tripped for what seemed like no reason at all and thrown all the food on her tray onto Kagami.

That was the beginning.

That explained everything.

After that, Kagami fell victim to similar spots of bad luck and even greater disasters.

She wasn't being attacked by humans, but rather by the myriad gods who had built this world.

They were the world itself, you could say.

Potted plants would fall on her head as she walked, cats and dogs would attack her… when she walked past a construction site, a ruptured water pipe would shower her with water, or the steel frame itself would come crashing down on her.

It was like Kagami was the main character in a slapstick comedy manga. Anything and everything in the world was out to get her.

They were all trying to drag her from her position of being the "Supreme God's friend."

No, in fact, her life was even in danger.

I remembered back to the time I saw her completely bloody that one night.

She had fought.

On the outside, she acted like nothing was wrong and was a friend to me during these "normal," happy times, but on the backside, she was fighting all along.

And of course, she would only want to be my friend at school.

That was Kagami's limit.

It was the best compromise she could come up with. If I innocently treated Kagami like a friend outside as well, then the entire world would begin to attack her there as well.

It already took all Kagami's strength to keep peace within the school.

She didn't hate me, and she wasn't rejecting me.

Instead, clumsy Kagami had taken on a completely thankless role, trying to hide everything from naïve little me so I wouldn't feel guilty.

She didn't like it and found it all very annoying, but she was trying her very best all the same.

@@@@@@

"Kagami…"

I just walked where my feet were taking me, and I finally made it.

I made it to the First Year, Right-Hand-Side classroom which had been an important part of my everyday life but would only continue to be for less than a week.

In the middle of that classroom, Kagami was sitting at her own desk.

The moonlight streaming in from the window highlighted her doll-like figure.

She was completely bloodied.

Today, she had been beaten black and blue too.

She was probably getting wounded day after day.

Her breath turned white in front of her face, and she looked to be in pain as she lay there with her eyes shut. I called out to her.

“Kagami!”

Kagami dazedly opened her eyes.

And then, she looked at me with a hint of surprise, but as always spoke to me in a completely unaffectionate tone.

“Oh my, what’s wrong, Sasami-san? Isn’t it a bit too early for you to come to school?”

“You too. Aren’t you staying after just a bit too late?”

Here was my better friend, who I had just started forming a relationship with and who always brought out my sarcastic side.

“Didn’t you have plans today?”

I slowly walked towards her until I was right in front of her.

I was close to tears, so I tried my best to look scary.

“Y-You were walking with a classmate, right? I thought you were going to hang out with her somewhere. That was Kagami’s friend?”

“I do not have any friends.”

Kagami muttered that and I heard her chuckle.

It was a pretty obnoxious attitude, but her voice was so weak and hoarse that I couldn't bring myself to get angry.

"It seemed that she had been possessed by evil gods, so I drove them all away. I guess their plan was to settle down inside real people, become friends with you, and then heighten their own divinities… the evil gods, I mean."

Kagami sounded pretty helpless as she said that.

"They would forcibly alter the person's psyche and try to make that person into an ideal friend for you. And you're just a naïve child, so I'm sure you would've been very happy with that."

Her voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"You would have probably been satisfied with even a fake friend like that. And, stupidly tempted by the evil gods, you would slowly alter the entire world down the wrong path. That would be a problem."

"You were worried for me, weren't you…?"

"Are you listening to me? Are you really that big of an idiot?"

"Thanks, Kagami."

I already understood everything.

It's exactly as you said.

I was… seriously… seriously an idiot before, Kagami.

I forgot about the power of the Supreme God inside of me, and I foolishly desired to have friends, to have a normal life.

I didn't even try to guess what kind of effect my wishes would have on my surroundings.

Kagami got wrapped up in it all… she got really hurt, and all for me.

"Sorry, I'm sorry…"

Hm? I can't see in front of me.

That's strange…

"Why are you crying? Are you a child?"

I could hear panic in Kagami's voice.

"No need to worry. Everything has been cleaned up. I made sure to tell all the gods inside the school to not do anything foolish, disciplined them, and pummeled the ones who tried to disobey. The gods inside the school will no longer try anything."

Kagami had a proud look on her face.

"From now on, if you make friends, you can rest assured that they won't just have been the result of alterations caused by evil gods. They will be true friends you made with your own strength. So don't worry, and please enjoy your bright, fun school life."

She didn't sound like she cared at all.

“Please excuse me from continuing this role though. I’m exhausted. Ahh, everything was so annoying. I finally get to sleep now… I really was sleep deprived, you know. Makes me almost want to ask for some kind of compensation. Having to work that hard for no reason… Sasami-san? Are you listening to me?”

“K-K-Kagamiiii…”

“Gyah?!”

I hugged her and pushed her to the ground.

Kagami was pretty weak right now, so she fell right over onto the cold classroom floor and looked up at the ceiling.

I buried my face in her chest and began to sniffle.

Just like a child.

Ugh, geez, I feel a dam has broken somewhere… the tears won’t stop coming now.

Kagami flushed deep red and tried to push me off her.

“What are you doing…?! I’m not into that kind of thing, okay? Hey, stop pushing your face into me! You’ll get snot on me! That’s dirty! Also, I’m the one full of holes right now… you should treat the injured with more care!”

“Kyagyabiii…”

I didn’t listen to a word she said.

“I’m so sorry! I-I was an idiot…! You won’t have to suffer anymore! I’m going to tell off all those gods who are bothering you! I’ll make sure you don’t get hurt anymore! So, Kagami… please… after this, I want to… forever…”

“Ugh, stop being so noisy, you whore!”

Kagami called me the worst thing I’ve ever been called in my life.

But I didn’t back down.

I just continued hugging Kagami and sobbing into her chest.

“Kagamiii… I’m sorry… *sob*… I really love you…”

“Ugh, you’re disgusting. You pig! Die!”

I’m sure Kagami didn’t know what to do either.

Out of sheer shyness, I had said some horrible, foolish things to Kagami. Told her she was a loaner friend, that I needed someone like “Kagami or whatever,” said that she was just there for practice.

I had said that she wasn’t a real friend, but I was just using her as a stepladder to eventually making real friends.

And Kagami had taken my words completely at face value.

So, she was trying her best; not so that I wouldn’t feel burdened or guilty about anything, but to make an environment in which I felt like I could get “normal friends.”

She was trying her best to suppress the gods within the school, so that I wouldn't consciously or unconsciously use the power of the Supreme God to cheat and make friends with a power outside of my own.

She had guessed that if that happened, I wouldn't be happy about it.

But, Kagami.

Understanding me like that, taking on my pain and problems like that…

There really was only one word to describe a relationship like that.

"Kagami."

I asked her one more time.

"Please, be my friend."

Kagami stopped resisting.

Just like a broken doll.

Or, maybe, just like a baby who had just been born into the world.

I really loved this side of her.

She wasn't used to receiving compliments from others, so she would go off track and turn others away, and would get misunderstood as a girl who rejected the company of others.

However, she really just felt lonely, and was clumsily trying her best for the sake of others…

I really like you.

Yeah, I definitely think I can grow to like you, more and more.

“I…”

Kagami began to mumble in a soft voice, as if she was talking to herself.

“In the past, I was a doll. A doll without a will. I was nothing more than a fabricated tool, tuned to perfection and able to carry out any task in the best way possible.”

Her beautiful voice rang poetically around the room.

“But I always felt incomplete. My heart was empty. I was just a lifeless machine, without any ability to cry. But even so, I wished to live an ‘average, normal’ life. Instead of an excellent doll who lived to kill or be killed, who carried out missions, I wanted to be a normal girl who could laugh and cry.”

I felt Kagami’s fingertips awkwardly touch me from behind.

“If my prayers could come true, then gods above, I wish to be human.”

I wasn’t a god though.

I was just a misshapen fake who was borrowing a god’s power.

I wanted to grant her wishes.

“I want to be a human. A stupid, weak, and yet warm human being.”

“Kagami…”

But I was a fool, so I couldn't do much for her right now.

There was one thing I could do, though.

"You're already warm."

I softly embraced her.

Embraced this girl covered in blood.

In this empty classroom, illuminated by nothing but the moonlight.

We were enveloped by silence, by darkness, but also by warmth.

"I… see…"

Kagami blinked over and over again, but then she gave me a small, relaxed smile.

Her smile was surprisingly beautiful.

"Will I be able to become human someday? Will I be able to… be your friend?"

"You will. Let's… try hard together from now on, Kagami."

This girl who used to be a doll a long time ago was probably very tired… she let out a long sigh, and then she closed her eyes while still clinging to me.

I could hear her breathing softly. She had fallen asleep.

"Good night, Kagami."

Maybe I should just go to sleep like this too…

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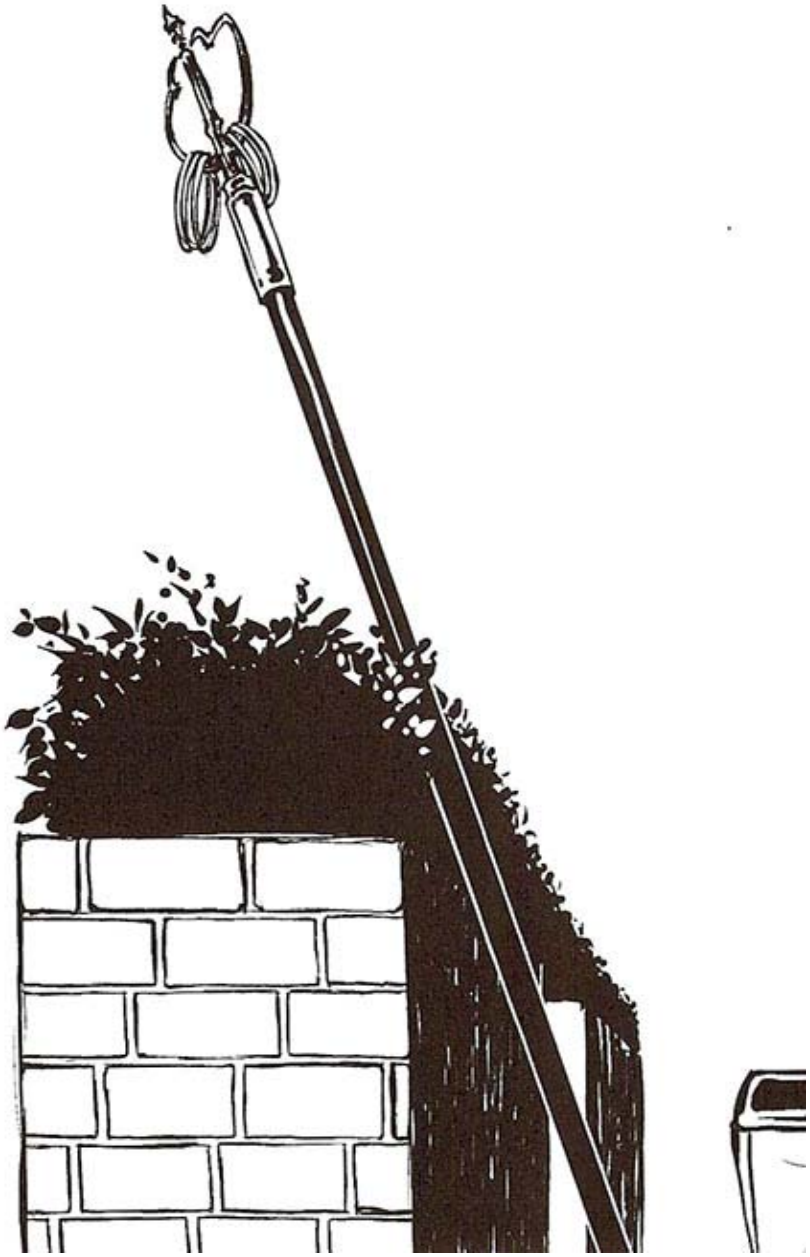
I only had one week left in my first year of high school.

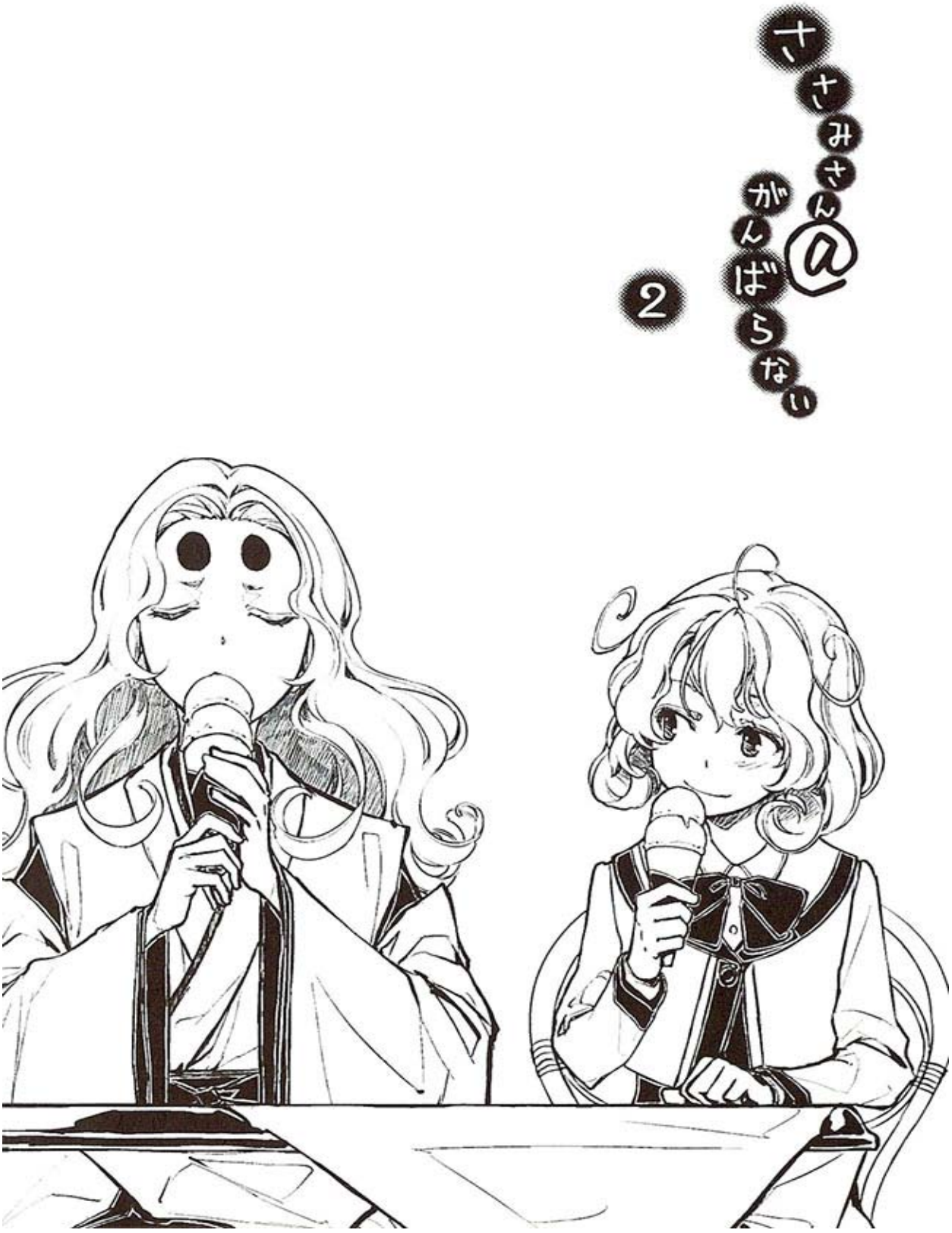
My youth was flying past me in the blink of an eye.

But, my new, kind friend had set the stage for me, so I would try my very best to enjoy this time with her to its fullest.

I would laugh, would cry, would argue, and would play.

Together with the person inside the mirror who reminded me so much of myself. Together with you.




ささみさん@がんばらない
2

PART 3: YOMOTSU HEGURI[1]

Chapter 13: Priestess of the Blood Hakama[2]

I saw my mother on the way back from school.

It was after school, and I had dropped by the shopping district to buy some things.

The streets were rather crowded, but my mother was wearing a very conspicuous outfit, so I recognized her instantly.

She was in her priestess garb.

Her clothes were an auspicious mixture of white and scarlet, the kind of clothes you wouldn't expect to see unless you were at a shrine and in January.

Her eyes were always closed, and she gripped a golden-colored khakkhara staff in her hand.

She really should've stood out a lot in that outfit, but none of the other people around seemed to be making a fuss about it.

It was almost like she was a ghost, or an optical illusion.

"Sasami."

My mother came up beside me and spoke to me as emotionlessly as ever.

"Going shopping?"

[1] Yomotsu, or Yomi, is the Underworld in Japanese Mythology. Yomotsu Heguri (or more commonly, Yomotsu Hegui) is a reference to how when one eats something in Yomi, one becomes irreversibly a resident of the Yomi.

[2] A hakama is a traditional divided skirt worn by men.

“Ah, yeah.”

I always felt myself shrinking in on myself when I stood next to my mother.

She was the most powerful priestess in generations of Tsukuyomi priestesses, and a spiritualist worthy of respect.

Everyone back at the shrine respected her, so to someone ignorant of the outside world like me, she was someone I idolized… my mother was like a god.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

“What will you purchase?”

My mother still had a bit of an old-fashioned way of speaking.

The gold ring at the top of her staff let out a clear ring.

“Umm, I go to a school near here…”

This was my mother I was talking to, but I still felt nervous.

“Oniichan always sends me home on his bike, umm… but two people riding together on a bike is illegal and umm… well, oniichan is still a teacher, so that might not be great. So I wanted to buy my own bike.”

I really couldn’t talk very well here.

“But I’m really wishy-washy, and I don’t know what to buy… also, it’s a bit embarrassing, but I don’t even know how to ride a bike… so uhh, maybe I should get something good for beginners, or something. So I’m thinking about that stuff.”

Also, if I drag this out and don't end up buying anything, then I could continue riding with my brother forever.

"If you need a bicycle to go to school, then perhaps something with a basket."

My mother pointed to a boorish-looking, functional model, and I scowled.

"I don't want that… it's not cute at all."

"A Tsukuyomi priestess has no use for 'cuteness.'"

My mother said that with a completely straight face.

"Seeking salvation from external sources is only a sign of weakness that others can exploit. Worldly preferences are naught but distractions; they prevent us from making firm decisions for the betterment of the world."

"Well, if you feel that strongly about it, why don't you buy one? A bike, I mean."

"I have no money. Money is evil."

This priestess was flat broke, wasn't she?

"Money is only useful in the materialistic world. The Tsukuyomi priestesses must maintain their freedom from such common desires. Receiving charity is allowable, but we must not allow ourselves to drown in the pleasure of such charity. Such is the duty of priestesses, who live closer to god than the common people."

My mother spoke in the same impersonal tone she always used.

"But, I will take this opportunity to impose myself upon my daughter's shopping trip. It has been quite a while since I have seen you… so I will accompany you while you inform me of recent events."

“Eh? Mom, you’re going shopping too?”

My eyes widened, and my mother gave me an emotionless nod in return.

“It is not bad to act like a mother and daughter occasionally.”

This was quite a turn of events for me, but I had always wanted to have a normal mother-daughter relationship with my mother, so I couldn’t help but accept her invitation.

I couldn’t help but accept… and conveniently forgot one potentially lethal fact.

@@@@@@

I really didn’t know where to go shopping with my mother.

Well, there was the huge shopping center which sold almost anything you could want, Mahoroba[3]. So I decided to head for there.

My mother was walking pretty slowly, but when I held out a hand to help support her, she would refuse. “I do not require additional assistance,” she would say. Ugh, what a bothersome person to deal with.

It took us quite a long time to walk a fairly short distance, but I was having fun.

My mother didn’t know much about the world, and talking with her and hearing her saying silly things made me laugh.

[3] Taken from Wikipedia: Mahoroba is an ancient Japanese word describing a far-off land full of bliss and peace. It is roughly comparable to the western concepts of arcadia, a place surrounded by mountains full of harmony and quiet.

That might've been a bit rude of me to do, but being able to go shopping with my mother with smiling like this… it made me happy.

This was definitely something that would've never happened back at the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

"Hm. What might that noisy contraption over there be?"

"It's a UFO catcher. You use this button here to move that crane. And then you can get one of these stuffed animals. Wanna try?"

"Dolls are evil. Objects modeled after living things are easier to imbue with a soul. There is the possibility that evil forces may have placed a curse on these… hng, please listen to me when I am talking."

"Ah, dammit. This is hard… I really want that bunny rabbit over there…"

"Leave this to your mother."

"Mom! You can't do that! You can't push your hand through the glass like that! How the hell are you doing that anyways?! Your fingers are going right though the glass!"

"I cannot see the significance of actually operating the crane. The priestesses of the Tsukuyomi Shrine know the value of expedience."

"No, that's against the rules! Look, that shop employee is seriously staring at us!"

"Hng. Well then, I will chant a charm and make the stuffed animal itself move."

"Scary! The stuffed animal is walking! Ah, it fell… well, I got the bunny, but is this really alright?"

“I grant you permission. And permission from a Tsukuyomi priestess is the same as permission from god.”

“Um, sorry, but I don’t think you can do that…” (*shop employee)

I hugged the bunny tight and ran away from the shop with my mother.

“Do not start running so suddenly. Your mother does not excel at physical activity.”

“I don’t either, but… you’re the one who did something completely ridiculous back there! It’s fine if that guy just got angry with us, but we might’ve gotten arrested!”

“A Tsukuyomi priestess will never yield to the likes of public law enforceme-… hahh, hahh, I request a short break.”

“Mom, you’re pretty weak… it’s pretty damning if you’re even less fit than I am, you know?”

“Your mother just does not see any significance in athleticism.”

My mother sat down on a bench and hung her head in exhaustion, while I left for a bit and headed for the nearby food court.

I brought back two, three-scoop ice cream cones and handed one to my mother.

“Mom, here. I bought these.”

“Hm. What exactly is that? I feel a dangerous coldness emanating from it.”

“It’s ice cream. Kind of like chilled sweets.”

“Consuming indulgences such as this is a sin. A Tsukuyomi priestess must always carefully consider what she places into her mouth. There is always the danger of poisoning, and all forms of pleasure can lead to attachments to other-“

“It’s fine, just have some. Here, it’s going to melt.”

“Hm… hyah?! C-Cold!”

“Ah, mom, you sounded pretty cute just now.”

“Your mother is always cute. Hm… this is… quite…”

I waited as my mother zealously finished eating her ice cream, and then we went shopping.

“Hm. There are lights flickering nearby. Is this the work of spirits?”

“Those are just electrical appliances… mom, do you have a computer? They’re pretty convenient.”

“A Tsukuyomi priestess sees no value in convenience. Convenience is merely something invented to aid in the lives of the commonfolk, while our role is to rule the land on which those lives are lived. We must swallow hardship, be unafraid of great toil, shoulder great deals of pain… Sasami? Are you listening?”

“Mom mom, buy this for me~~?”

“I refuse. Material desires are evil. Also, your mother is completely penniless.”

“Hmm, oniichan would’ve bought this for me in an instant.”

"That is unacceptable. Do not seek to depend on *that* too much. Your heart will rot. Such rules apply to 'compyooturs' as well. It is fine to use such things as tools for convenience, but dependence is an evil. Using a 'net-wurk' and connecting to the outside world will only disturb the peaceful isolation of our gods. Should the gods integrate, should they begin to mutually encroach upon each other, then the logic governing our world will overturn, and this world will enter into its twilight-"

"Hey, mom, look here! I'll pick out some clothes for you! You must be getting tired of that priestess outfit."

"Hm. Sasami, when did you move over there? Your movements are quite difficult to read. Well then, about what I have been saying up until…"

"Mom, why are you having a stare-off with that fancy-looking washing machine?"

@@@@@@

We shopped for quite a long time.

In the end, no matter what I suggested, my mother didn't even try to buy it. She didn't even try on any of the clothes I picked out for her.

I didn't have much money on me either, so I just ended up window shopping a lot.

In the end, the only thing I added to my collection today was the stuffed bunny my mother had gotten for me through illegal means.[4]

[4] This is followed by the parenthetical statement "My sentence endings were getting a bit influenced by my mother." Sasami used the formal, more archaic "dearu" ending in this sentence, which is the same ending her mother has been using the entire time. This is almost impossible to really encapsulate well in English, so I omitted this line.

“Ahh, that was fun!”

I felt like I had used my time fully. It was now pretty far into the evening.

My brother had probably already finished work, and was busy at home preparing dinner by now.

Usually, I would probably have to head home now, but…

“Mom, do you want some dinner? I can just email my brother and tell him I’ll be home late. Do you have some more free time?”

“A girl who once was unable to do anything is now here speaking to me with such arrogance...”

My mother was completely exhausted. Geez, she was weak.

We were taking a break at the food court where I had gotten ice cream earlier.

There were a bunch of round tables and chairs around us, and I could see lots of shoppers happily chatting away with each other.

There were also a bunch of little food shops nearby. The customers here could just go and order whatever they wanted there and bring their food back to these tables to eat.

I could smell the heavy scent of sauce from the food cart, the soy sauce and pork bone broth from the ramen shop, and a sweet aroma from the crepe shop.

Those smells worked in perfect harmony to fan the flames of my hunger.

“I’ll go buy something. What do you want to eat?”

“I do not need anything. More importantly, please sit there quietly. I have something I need to discuss with you.”

I was about to get up, but my mother forced me back down.

I had no idea what she wanted to talk about. I heard my mother sigh as she began to speak quietly.

“You said you had fun earlier, did you not, Sasami? Your mother finds that quite pleasing. I do not believe we have ever been able to spend such a normal day together, going shopping and conversing like this.”

She had on the same expression as ever, but I could feel a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“I was not a good mother to you. I apologize, Sasami.”

“Eh, ahh… that’s…”

She just straight-out apologized to me. I really didn’t know what to do.

I hated the Tsukuyomi Shrine, but I didn’t hold any of that against my mother.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

“Don’t apologize, mom. I’m happy to be able to spend just a bit of time with you like this… like just a normal family. That’s always been a dream of mine.”

“You must have been lonely up until now. Because of me.”

“It’s okay, mom. I know you were working really hard to be the Tsukuyomi priestess, and trying to train me to be a good successor at the same time. You were trying to discipline me and make me strong. That’s the only reason I managed to live until today.”

I told my mother my true feelings.

“Thank you. I’m really grateful. And I love you, mom. Please believe that. But, even so… there is something I have to ask.”

And so, the curtain drew on my happy day. Everything came to a full stop.

This was the trigger that destroyed the illusion.

-

“My mom… should’ve already passed away…”

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It may be a bit late, but I think I should explain some more about my family.

Our tribe had existed since time immemorial, since Ninigi no Mikoto had descended from the heavens, and we *trapped* the power of the Supreme God within our family line via incest.

My mother excelled at being the Tsukuyomi priestess more than anybody in history.

She used her abilities to make this world a much better place for humans. Under her rule, occult and supernatural phenomena were restrained to a bare minimum, while the gods were controlled and driven into corners.

I almost wanted to say that because of this, she had picked a fight with the gods and was cursed…

Either way, while my mother was still overflowing with youth, she had her life mercilessly taken from her.

When I was a small child, my mother's health deteriorated and she majestically departed from this world.

Perhaps it was because of genetic defects accumulated over generations and generations of incest, or perhaps it was because of the cruel role that was thrust upon us, but the Tsukuyomi priestesses usually didn't have very long life spans.

And my mother was no exception.

I remembered.

I remembered my mother's pale face as she lay on her death bed.

I remembered her thin, emaciated fingers, which looked like they'd break at the slightest touch.

Her beautiful hair had become frayed, and the whites of her eyes were exposed.

This is what death looked like.

Humans were frail. As time went on, they grew more and more unsightly, until losing their lives at the end of it all.

Like drops of rain, falling down to earth.

Her erratic breathing became weaker and weaker, until she took her last breath and lay completely still.

Her heartbeat disappeared, and the warmth slowly drained from her body.

I clung onto her the entire time, sobbing, and I knew exactly what had happened.

My mother had died.

But even so…

“You say… I have passed away?”

My mother was now sitting right next to me, speaking to me with a hint of puzzlement in her voice.

I couldn’t understand this.

My mother had died.

There was no mistaking that. I had no doubt in that fact.

And yet, on the way back from school, I went shopping… and she was there waiting for me like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Rather than surprised, it would be more accurate to say that I was completely dazed.

I had never expected something like this to happen.

But I couldn't just ignore this, so I went together with her, talked with her, and observed her.

And I concluded that this was definitely my mother.

She wasn't a fake.

I had the power of the Supreme God, so if I really observed something carefully, then I should've been able to see through any illusions.

But the person in front of me was my mother.

She was a living, breathing human with a real body who could move about.

My mother had come back to life.

I had no idea exactly how that had happened, but that was probably the truth.

"Sasami."

My mother cocked her head slightly to the side and muttered in a bored tone.

"Did you think… I had not realized that myself?"

"… Eh?"

"Of course, I am already deceased."

My mother closed her eyes and spoke in her usual dignified tone.

“This body’s appearance has also been smoothed over, but it is still a deceased body. It is slowly rotting away. Only, an alteration has hid its presence from the people around us. You have also been unwilling to notice it, as you do not desire to perceive me as a decomposing body… like so.”

In the next instance, my mother’s staff pulsed.

The golden ring on top of the staff clanged.

“… Wha-…”

At the same time, an offensive smell attacked my senses.

And I gazed in amazement at my mother.

She had transformed.

No. She had been this way the entire time, but I just didn’t want to notice.

Her priestess garb blackened and rotted into a torn rag dirtied by a mixture of blood and mud.

Her skin lost all its moisture, drying up into what almost looked like tree bark. Her skin had collapsed to the point where I could see blood vessels and bone exposed in various places.

Her hair had mostly fallen out, while maggots crawled around her open eye sockets.

Flies buzzed around, and a rotten-looking liquid seeped from her mouth.

“Uwaahh?!?!”

I fell from my chair and landed squarely on the floor.

I didn't want to see this. I didn't want this.

I didn't want something like this.

I didn't want to understand what was going on.

I covered both my eyes with my hands and shivered, while my mother's voice cascaded down on me.

"All humans must eventually pass away. The souls of the deceased descend down towards the gates of Yomotsu, returning to their root. This is the way this world, or more precisely, this country functions. There is no reincarnation. The deceased will never live again. That is the ironclad rule. And I am no exception to that rule."

My mother's voice cracked above me. It was really hard to hear what she was saying.

"However, there is a way to escape."

My mother continued to casually explain.

"Before I ate the fruits of the Underworld, before I completely became a denizen of that Underworld, I negotiated with the King. His and my interests seemed to align, and so I was allotted time to return to this transient plane of existence until my body completely rotted away."

She had literally returned from the land of Yomi.[5]

[5] In Japanese, the word for resurrect is "yomigaeru." This can also be read as "yomi + kaeru," where kaeru means "to return." So you could read the word for resurrect in Japanese literally as "returning from Yomi," where Yomi is the name for the Underworld in Japanese mythology.

She had forcibly distorted the rules of this world.

This was not normal. This completely defied common sense.

It was impossible. Ridiculous.

This was probably something only the greatest of spiritualists, my mother, could have accomplished.

“Why…?”

I timidly opened my eyes back up, and saw that my mother had returned back to her normal, human form.

No, rather… I had wished for it, so that’s how she appeared to me… she was still really a rotting corpse.

“Why did you… come back from Yomi? Why did you do such an abominable thing when even Izanagi and Izanami failed to do that…?[6] You’re just a human, but you did something… so horrific…”

What my mother did…

It was completely and utterly sinful.

It was like taking out a pistol during a boxing match.

No, it was more like massacring the entire opposing team with a machine gun during a soccer game.

[6] Two of the original Japanese gods.

What an awful, awful violation of the rules. This wasn't something that a human could ever be permitted to do.

That's why I was terrified.

The happiness I had felt at meeting my mother again evaporated in an instant.

"'Why,' you ask?"

I shook in fear, but my mother proceeded as if nothing had happened.

"Originally, I had allowed myself to pass peacefully. My body had been eaten by disease, but I had persisted in fulfilling my duties splendidly until I had taken my last breath. For the sake of this world. For the sake of the humans in this world. I had acted in a way befitting of a Tsukuyomi priestess… for this world and the people's interests."

My mother always liked to talk like that.

"But, I could not stay deceased peacefully. Before I ate the fruits of the Underworld, I suddenly became anxious for my daughter. Unable to resist, I stole a look back into the world above, and I saw everything. I saw how you escaped from the shrine, how you abandoned your role as the Tsukuyomi priestess, and how you began to live your life of pleasures and diversions."

There was no fear in my mother's voice.

And that's why I was afraid.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

But, I…

“I recall saying this to none other but you, Sasami, on my death bed. ‘Take care of the world for me,’ I had said. And you had nodded. And you responded ‘leave it to me, mom.’ However, you have broken your promise. But I will not blame you for that. You are not the only one at fault in the end.”

My mother stood up.

I was still sitting on my behind on the floor. My mother stood above me, staring down at her foolish daughter who couldn’t even stand back up.

“Before I could raise you to be a proper successor, before you had completed your training, I passed away. And therein lay my mistake. You were not foolish to run away. Rather, I was foolish for dying before I could raise you to be strong enough not to run away.”

And that’s why my mother had come back from Yomi.

She had twisted the rules of this world, and had come back with her rotting, ugly body, all the while probably enduring the agony of Hell.

“Return to the shrine, Sasami. We will begin your training anew.”

“T-The shrine…”

I slid my behind back on the floor, scooting backwards.

“The shrine got destroyed. There’s no more ‘Tsukuyomi Shrine’ anymore… where do you want me to go back to?”

The three Yagami sisters had attacked and destroyed the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

“I am aware of that.”

My mother didn’t seem shaken at all.

“However, what we need is not land. It is not the physical facilities of a shrine. Buildings can always be rebuilt. Rather, all that is necessary is a quiet environment in which training can be held away from the diversions of the world.”

We were in a pretty chaotic food court, but nobody around us seemed to pay me or my mother any mind.

For spiritualists who hunted supernatural abnormalities, the ability to erect barriers to divert attention away from yourself was the most basic of skills.

“Do not make me repeat myself. Be reasonable and return with me. The time for play is over.”

“N-No…”

My mother reached out to me, but I was terrified and feebly resisted.

I continued to back away and try to put some distance between me and my mother, all the while pointlessly knocking over tables and chairs.

“I’m not going back! I’m fine without training until I’m spitting blood and crying, just to make the world a ‘better place for humans’ or whatever! Because of those people, you died… they bring nothing but pain… I’m not going back to a shrine like that! I’m not a Tsukuyomi priestess anymore!”

“Do not misunderstand my words, Sasami. I am not asking you for your opinion.”

There was a slight bit of annoyance in my mother’s tone.

“This is for all of mankind. Are you claiming that your own happiness, freedom, and comfort take priority over the future of humanity? Your fate is not the only one resting on your shoulders. This is a noble issue that supersedes trivialities such as one human life. Stop behaving like a spoiled child!”

My mother was a Tsukuyomi priestess to her very core. To her, the joys of the world outside, and my feelings… they were just idle grumbles that were impossible to understand.

The only thing running through my mother’s head was the desire to maintain a world that was fit to live in for humans.

Our sense of values were vastly different.

I understood that all too well.

“Do not behave like such a child! Foolish girl, when do you plan to grow up?!”

My mother came up to me with great strides and grabbed me by my collar. She slapped me as hard as she could.

I felt my brains rattle.

“If you are not a Tsukuyomi priestess, then your existence has no value! Spending each day aimlessly, abandoning your duties, and falling into inactivity is nothing short of a sin! Why do you not understand?! I should never have spoiled you during your upbringing, you fool of a daughter!”

I felt my eyes blur with tears.

Memories began to run through my mind like a revolving lantern.

I saw my brother patting my head.

I saw Tsurugi pushing me from behind.

I saw Kagami smiling at me.

I saw Tama embracing me.

I… I…

-

“Hey there, mum. Stop getting so worked up. Don’tcha think it’s goin’ a bit far to hit your kid?”

-

Suddenly, I heard a voice.

A moronic-sounding voice… but a voice that filled me with relief.

@@@@@@

“Hm.”

My mother turned her sharp gaze to a *certain someone* who at some point had shown up.

“Not like I wanna make a habit of butting into family stuff… but violence is a bit bad, ain’t it? She’s not a dog. You can’t just hit her and force her to listen. Almost seems like child abuse, don’t it? I think we need to have a parent-teacher talk, mum.”

It was Tsurugi, who looked prepared for a fight even as she spewed nonsense out of her mouth.

At some point, everyone else had disappeared from the food court. Tsurugi was watching us from a corner, right to our side.

She had a sour look on her face, and she was holding a familiar-looking crimson-colored bundle over her shoulder.

“T-Tsurugi!”

I must’ve looked pretty pathetic, calling out her name like that with tears leaking from my eyes.

Tsurugi gave me a casual wave. “Yo,” she said as she slowly walked over to us.

“Kagami told me she felt something weird around you, so… sorry for showing up late. Well, I was listening in a bit, so I pretty much got what’s going on. First time I’ve seen someone come back from Yomi by herself.”

“Evil gods such as you should cease speaking like the humans.”

My mother let go of me and spoke in a cold voice.

I fell to the ground in pain, but I still pathetically tried to crawl away from my mother.

My mother ignored my attempts to escape and put her weight on her staff like Zatoichi.[7]

[7] A fictional, blind swordsman from Japanese film and TV.

“Did you plan to tempt Sasami with that smile and those comforting words of yours? I do not know what you are planning to use Sasami for… but I will not allow an evil god to have her way with Sasami.”

“I’m not an evil god, ya know. And come on, you’re the monster who came back from Yomi.”

Tsurugi took out an old double-edged blade from her bundle.

“Not even the gods can come back to life after they die. That’s the rule that pops set out for this world. You get a short life, so you live it to its fullest. That’s the same for everyone. You’re the one who broke the rules, so don’t get all damn cocky and think *you* can lecture *me*”

I could sense an intense amount of pressure beginning to churn up between my mother and Tsurugi.

It was a mixture of fighting spirit and killing intent… the kind of thing that put a chill down your spine but also lit your entire body on fire.

I cowered. I couldn’t even let out a sound as I just watched the situation unfold.

I didn’t like this.

For some reason, I really, really didn’t like this…

“Dead people don’t belong in this world. I might’ve been a lazy slob that abandoned her duties, but I can’t just ignore such an awful violation of the rules… so allow me to make things right.”

Tsurugi exhaled sharply, and stepped firmly into the ground.

“Sasami isn’t being tricked; she’s just living a life she chose for herself! Someone like you who died and left her alone a long time ago doesn’t have any right to come back and start acting like her mother!”

Like that, Tsurugi made a straight leap at my mother and thrust her sword out.

“I’ll send you right back to hell on the express train!”

“… It appears I am being underestimated.”

It was the next second.

A strange noise echoed through the air.

It was almost like someone had struck a gong.

“For generations, the Tsukuyomi priestesses have been tasked as spiritualists to eliminate any and all types of irregularities… they represent the very best of the Tsukuyomi Shrine. Extermination of evil gods is our specialty.”

Tsurugi’s sword had been repelled by my mother’s staff.

Her staff, no thicker than a human finger, had managed to stop Tsurugi’s blade completely in its tracks.

“As. I. Said…”

Tsurugi’s eyes widened in shock, but she still swung her sword again and again.

“I’m not an evil god!”

But each time Tsurugi swung her sword, my mother blocked or otherwise dealt with Tsurugi’s attacks with the slightest of body movements.

Tsurugi had not even managed to scratch my mother.

I had thought my mother was really weak and unathletic too…

Tsurugi swung her sword in all directions, but my mother dodged her attacks nimbly, almost as if she knew exactly where Tsurugi was going to thrust.

As expected, Tsurugi's facial expression began to pale.

"W-Wha-…?!"

"You are as unskilled in fights as the myths suggest… Sun Goddess."

My mother quickly thrust her hand out.

Her fingertip made direct contact somewhere around Tsurugi's forehead. Tsurugi seemed to lose balance, and was pulled by her own momentum down to the ground, rolling backwards quite a number of times.

"Neesan!"

It was right after that.

A black-haired girl rushed over with panicked steps, her hair swinging back and forth. It was Kagami.

Tama was also standing behind her. It seemed all three Yagami sisters were here in full force.

"Are you alright, neesan?! Also, Sasami-san?!"

"Ow ow ow…"

Tsuguri kicked away all the tables and chairs she had knocked over while she had been rolling on the ground and then stood right back up.

“Stay away, Kagami, Tama! This one is pretty strong! You’d be no match for her!”

“It doesn’t seem like neesan is a match for her either though…”

Kagami mumbled that with a look of exasperation in her eyes, but she didn’t come any closer.

So, I guess they had been watching us from afar, but once they realized things were getting bad Tsurugi had come over alone to help.

“As expected, the Tsukuyomi priestesses do not seem like humans at all.”

Kagami seemed to understand exactly what was going on without any further explanation.

“By the way, neesan, please stop trying to rush around by yourself. Right now, neesan is just an empty husk compared to her previous self, so she might be at a disadvantage when dealing with professionals.”

“Shut up. What kind of teacher would I be if I didn’t step in when I see a mother hitting her kid?!”

Tsurugi finally stood back up and readied her blade again.

My mother just stared at Tsurugi and the others and let out a long sigh, almost as if she was watching a bad comedy on TV.

“You are all overly relaxed. This land’s gods are all hedonistic. That is why we cannot leave this land’s affairs to you. We will not turn the clock hands back until we are immersed in the same state of chaos that existed before the times of legend. This world has developed and flourished purely because it has been under human control.”

This was the natural way to think for my mother, for a Tsukuyomi priestess.

She wasn’t willing to listen to any dissenting opinions, to any opposing arguments… so I’m sure she wouldn’t understand.

“If you choose to inherit the power of the Supreme God and yet choose to live an idle life full of material pleasures, then you have failed as a human being. Furthermore, I cannot humor you by accompanying you on your play dates while ignoring your transgressions as you plunge the world into chaos.”

My mother grasped her staff tightly and pointed it towards the side.

The pressure I felt in the air multiplied tenfold.

“Everything is for the sake of the world, for the sake of the humans in this world. I cannot stay long in this plane anymore, so I will make sure to train Sasami to carry out her duties successfully as my final act. If you wish to stand in my way, I will not hold a grudge against you, but I will not allow you to continue living either.”

“I’m not gonna go to the Underworld! Some of the people there really annoy the crap out of me!”

Tsurugi yelled that and once again swung her sword in a straight, direct attack.

I knew that sword.

I knew that it housed divine powers within it.

That it could exterminate low-level gods with the slightest touch.

Once again, I heard the sound of a gong.

@@@@@@

"……?!"

This time, Tsurugi froze in her tracks as well.

My mother had defended against Tsurugi's attack with her staff, and she then moved that staff slightly.

No, I saw now that it wasn't just a normal staff.

A blade appeared in the middle of the staff, separating the staff into a thin saber and a scabbard.

This was a double-edged blade, which resembled Tsurugi's sword, but it felt more sinister.

"Your blade has quite a bit of power. As expected from the divine blade Ame-no-Murakumo… however, at its core, your blade is a defensive one. A blade imbued with holy power like that has no ability to kill others. Your blade is nothing more than a grass-cutter intended for self-defense. You will need a blade with more ill-will to destroy your enemies."

My mother tossed away the scabbard portion of her staff and readied her sword at eye-height.

“This is the Ame-no-Habakiri, a god-killing, magical blade that the King of the Underworld has entrusted to me. It is the blade which cut down the Yamata no Orochi, which was once cursed and broken into pieces but was then reforged and sharpened in the forges of the Underworld. You will soon be but a spot of rust on this blade of misfortune.”

“The Ame-no-Habakiri, you said…?! And the King of the Underworld… I see. I see what’s going on!”

My mother and Tsurugi exchanged sword strikes a number of times.

Strange noises rang around me while blade met blade and sent ominous sparks flying through the air.

“You bastard! So it was *that guy* all along! I thought it was strange you found your way out of Yomi, but that damn idiot with the Oedipus complex was behind it all, wasn’t he?! Ahh, I finally see what’s been going on! You’re way too strong for a human… nyoohh?!”

While Tsurugi was raising a fuss, my mother unhesitatingly charged her.

She sent her blade diagonally downwards and sliced into Tsurugi.

Tsurugi managed to deflect my mother’s blade a bit with her own sword, so she somehow escaped from the full force of the attack, but her small body was still easily swept away and thrown violently into the wall.

“Neesan?!”

Kagami paled, and pointed her right arm at my mother.

It was really odd to see the normally calm Kagami looking so panicked.

“Y-You… how dare you?!”

A black hole opened in her palm, and what looked like machine gun bullets flew out of the hole.

This was probably one of the spiritual weapons that Kagami was equipped with.

The bullets gouged into the floor and wall and bore down on my mother at supersonic speeds.

“What foolishness.”

However, my mother was still perfectly calm.

Kagami’s attack hadn’t made a single dent.

The bullets reached my mother but then disappeared, only leaving behind strange ripples like they had been pebbles thrown into the deep sea.

It just wasn’t possible…

“T-That’s…?!”

Kagami’s eyes widened in shock, and my mother pointed her magical blade at her.

“Someone with your level of divinity has no hope of harming me. You may have gained a moderate amount of strength, but in a spiritual battle divinity determines everything. I am under the protection of the King of the Underworld, and I possess this divine sword, so the average god has no hope of even touching me.”

My mother said that in one breath, and in the next…

The blade that should've been in my mother's palm had suddenly pierced through Kagami's chest.

It's not like she had thrown the sword.

No, I hadn't seen the sword fly through the air and piece into Kagami. Rather, it was almost as if the sword just suddenly appeared in Kagami's chest. This… defied all logic.

"Kagami?!" "Kagami-nee?!"

Tsurugi and Tama both shrieked, while Kagami bent back and collapsed to the ground.

I saw her head bounce and her hair swing upwards in slow motion.

At the end of it all, she spat out large amounts of fresh blood.

She should've been pierced in her chest, but I saw the damage spread quickly to her stomach and shoulders.

It was like watching a crack run through glass… Kagami's body was breaking apart, her blood glittering in the light.

The vividly red pool of blood under her grew larger and larger. Kagami's fingers convulsed a number of times before she grew still.

If she was human, she would've definitely died from that.

As a god… who knew what was going to happen.

I felt my mind grow blank.

I couldn't think of anything.

I didn't know what was going on anymore.

"Y-You bastard…!!"

Tsurugi looked enraged and flew at my mother.

My mother's sword had pinned Kagami to the floor like a bug in a bug collection, and my mother was no longer holding onto her weapon.

Maybe Tsurugi saw that as her chance, or maybe she was just blind with rage at seeing her little sister hurt, but she flew at my mother with tremendous force.

"You are too weak."

My mother didn't move, but just held out her hand.

"We no longer consider the foreign world as distant lands. We are becoming interconnected, losing our borders… we can no longer rely on ignorant, powerless gods such as yourself to control this world that will surely soon become enshrouded in chaos."

And then, as if there was an invisible zipper in the middle of the air…

My mother lightly grabbed something in front of her, and then pulled downwards.

It was in the next second.

The air in front of my mother cracked, and a hole into the void appeared.

"Uwoohh?!"

Tsurugi was rushing right into that hole with all her might.

She instantly twisted her body and tried to dodge, but at that moment my mother seemed to skip a few steps again and teleported right behind Tsurugi.

“After returning from Yomi, I have found that it is easy to connect the space around me back to the Underworld. And whether you are human or god, finding your way back from the Underworld is a nearly impossible task.”

Tsurugi was then very, very casually pushed from behind.

Tsurugi let out a yell as she fell into the hole, soon vanishing from sight.

“Your time has long since past. Sun Goddess, sink into Oblivion and surrender the world to the moon.”

The hole soon closed again.

Silence filled the food court.

I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

The Yagami sisters might’ve been unreliable, might’ve often acted like nonsensical idiots… but they were still high-level gods and had saved me time and time again.

They drove away all irregularities like it was nothing, did the impossible on a daily basis… but they couldn’t do a single thing here.

Tsurugi had been swallowed by darkness, Kagami lay motionless in a sea of blood, and Tama…

Tama was cowering.

She was a newly-formed god, and this was probably the first time she had ever seen such a high-level battle.

Tama also had always depended on and respected her older sisters.

And those older sisters had both been easily defeated.

So, if Tama saw all this and shrunk in on herself in fear, and didn't even want to move anymore… I didn't blame her.

"Well then, it seems there is no longer anybody who will interrupt us."

My mother ignored Tama, and just walked towards me as I also huddled over in fear.

I couldn't move at all.

I couldn't understand what had just happened in front of me.

What the hell was this? I felt dizzy.

I even felt nauseous… I didn't want to believe this.

Tama moved.

"O-Ooo…"

Tama slowly walked in front of my mother and blocked her way, trembling all the while.

She spread her arms out in front of me. I continued to sit there pathetically, not being able to even speak out.

Tama's eyes teared up, and her lips trembled.

But she showed no sign of backing off, even as she stood in front of the resurrected, strongest Tsukuyomi priestess who had ever lived, someone who even her sisters couldn't defeat.

"Move away, little fish."

My mother's words were completely frank.

But when she saw Tama wasn't budging, my mother began to speak again, a bit of irritation in her voice.

"You all may feel better about yourselves, pretending to be the allies of justice and protecting my selfish daughter… but it is all meaningless. There is no worth to your actions. For this world, for the humans in this world, Sasami will become a marvelous Tsukuyomi priestess, and will lead this land on the path of righteousness."

"I-I don't know… Tama doesn't know anything… but."

A single line of tears streaked down Tama's cheek.

"This is wrong, so wrong! Why are you being so mean?! Everyone was finally happy! Tsurugi-nee was having so much fun! Kagami-nee was finally laughing! It was all because of Mamarin… but, but, you…! I don't know what you're saying! Tama doesn't understand at all!"

"Well then, please allow me to explain things to you simply."

My mother reached out for Tama's face with her hand.

-

“You are in my way.”

-

I finally moved.

Without even thinking, I thrust both my hands forwards and jumped at my mother.

Wrapping my arms around her, I toppled to the ground with her and begged her.

“Just stop it already!”

I should’ve just said this from the very beginning.

I was being such an idiot all along.

”I’ll go back with you!”

Just like I had often done when I was a little kid, I desperately pleaded with my mother.

I couldn’t do anything else.

“I’ll go back to the shrine… back to being a Tsukuyomi priestess… so just stop it!”

I couldn’t even process what my mother said in response.

I think Tama was yelling about something, but I couldn’t hear about what.

I was worried about Tsurugi and Kagami.

Also, where exactly was my brother in the middle of all of this…?

"……"

I heard a ringing in my ears.

I had unconsciously closed my eyes, but I suddenly opened them.

And I found myself in the middle of a small, unfamiliar room, sitting on top of a wooden floor.

When I looked down at my body, I saw I was wearing a priestess outfit that matched what my mother had been wearing.

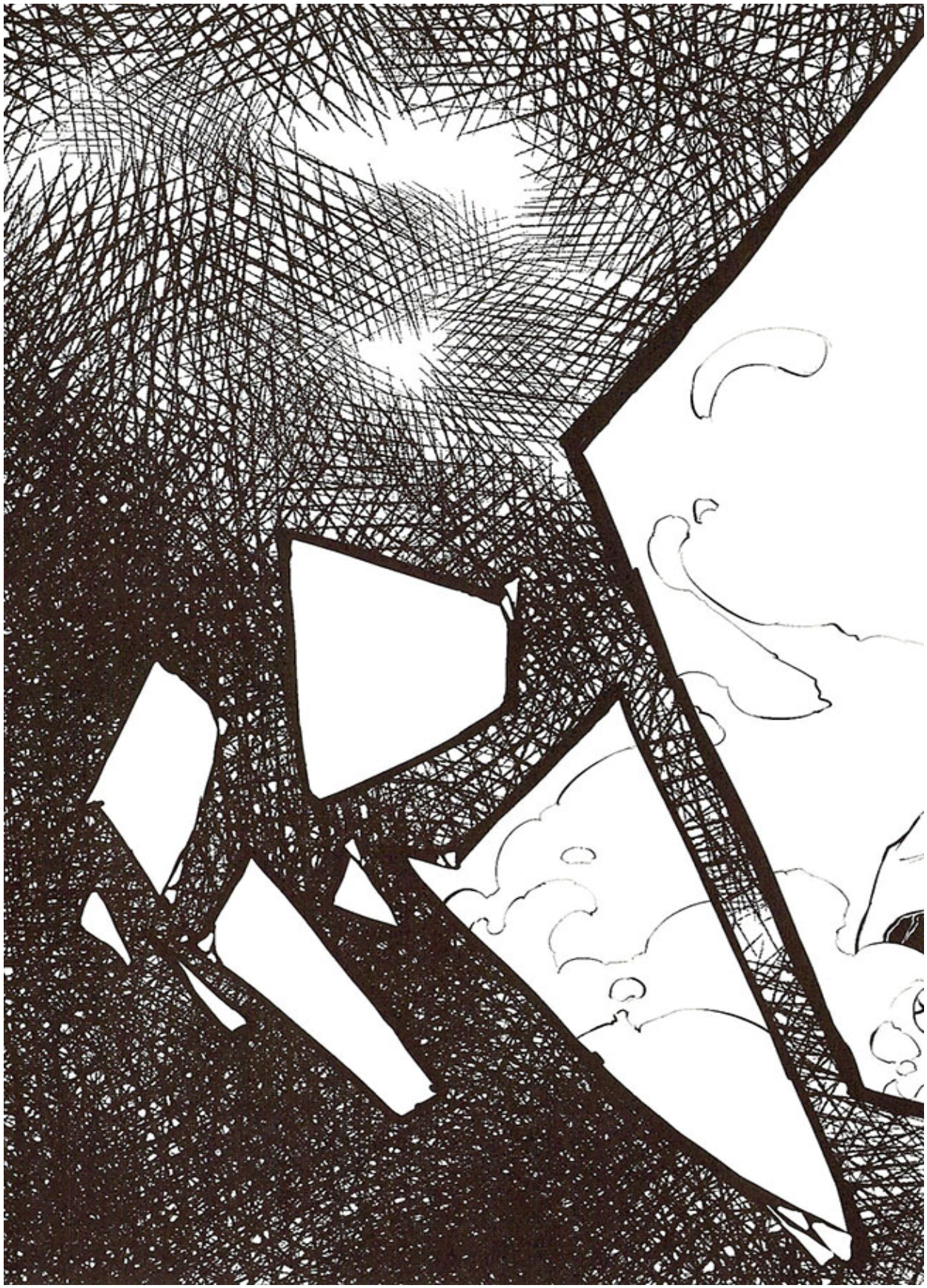
It was almost as if those times I had been wearing a Konohana Sakuya Academy uniform… that had all been a lie.

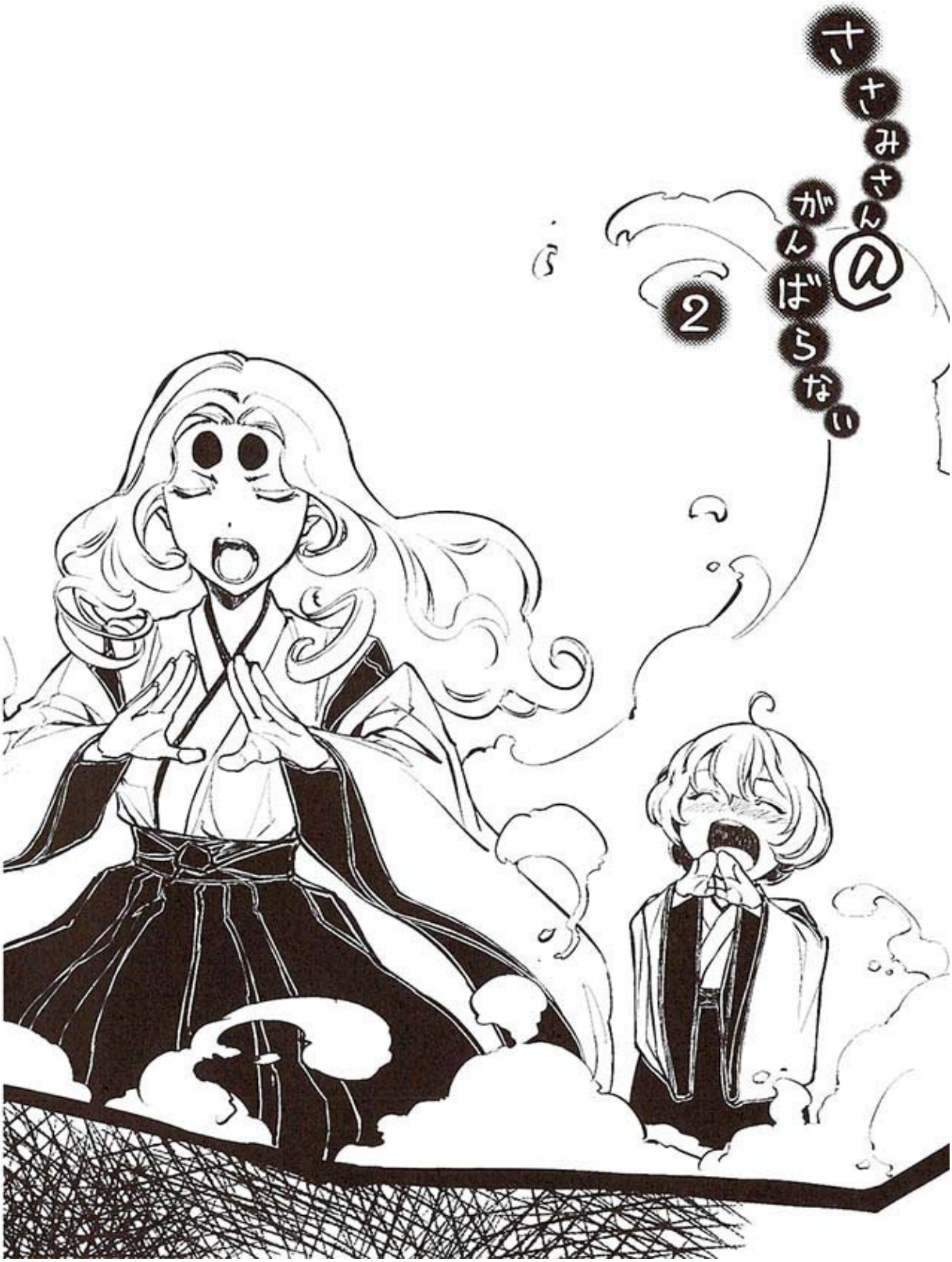
Or rather, it felt like anything and everything was just a dream, and I was finally waking up.

I looked up in a daze, and saw my mother sitting across from me. For probably the first time since our reunion, she smiled at me.

"Welcome back to the human world."

And then, after that point, I knew no more.




ささみさん@がんばらない
2

Chapter 14: Mandala of Mother and Daughter (Front Half)[1]

-- Mooom~~.

-- Hm. What is it, Sasami? You are interrupting my training.

-- Mooom, what's that cool pose? Sasami wants to try too!

-- This is not a "cool pose." It is called the Chant of Returning Roads. With this, I am able to seal all forms of magic and agitate all nearby irregularities. It is both an incantation and a form of meditation.

-- Ehehe. Mom is like a superhero. Okay, Sasami will be the bad guy! Mom is the hero, 'kay? Umm, like this? The chant of ree-tuhr-ning rowds?

-- Where exactly did you learn useless trivia such as that? I am not a superhero. I am a Tsukuyomi miko.

-- But mom, a Tsukuyomi miko is kinda like an ally of justice, right? You have super important work to protect all the people. So, you're a hero!

-- Hm. I detect no contradiction in your words.

-- Oryaahh! Towaaah! Like this? Is Sasami doing it good?

-- There is no need to shout during this chant. Also, your pose is incorrect.

-- But shouting makes it cooler! You sound strong and your enemies will run away! Towaah!

-- Is that so? Towaah…?

[1] A Mandala is a spiritual symbol in Buddhism and Hinduism, representing the Universe.

-- Mom, you're too quiet!

-- Hm. Do not underestimate me. Your mother will show you her true strength. Towaah!!

-- Ahahah! Ahahahah!

-- What is it, Sasami? Why are you laughing?

-- I love you, mom! Ahahah! Towahh!!

-- You are certainly a strange child… towaah!

@@@@@@

My palms felt cold.

I shivered at the sensation and felt myself being forcefully dragged from my dreams of happy memories. The peace I had been granted in my escape from reality was also snatched away from me.

I was in a dark room.

The room was about as big as a tea room.

It was just big enough for me to lie down in.

The ceiling wasn't very high either; rather than calling it a "room," it might've been better to call it a "box."

The floors consisted of wooden boards, while the walls were made from tough-looking stone.

Moths buzzed around a small lit light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

The room was filled with the smell of dried leaves.

I could feel it in my skin. This was… my old home.

The Tsukuyomi Shrine.

All the buildings in the shrine should've been destroyed, so this was probably a makeshift hut they had hurriedly built on the shrine remains.

Or, maybe they had just reconstructed a building that hadn't been destroyed in the attack.

It's not like I had a complete knowledge of the Tsukuyomi Shrine anyways, so I wasn't sure.

"… Ah…"

My head was spinning.

I couldn't really think straight.

It was hard to form a coherent sentence in my brain… I couldn't really picture anything well either.

In other words, my ability to think had been stolen away from me.

It felt like I was locked away in some faraway place, gazing helplessly at my own empty vessel in that hut.

The cold in the air, the passage of time… it all felt flat, like I was living in someone else's skin.

What an awful feeling of emptiness this was.

"It would be unfortunate if you used the power of the Supreme God on me, so I have diluted your consciousness with the aid of drugs. I've also placed spiritual barriers around you, but those are there merely for my own peace of mind. They will not be able to fully contain such an extraordinary power as that of the Supreme God."

I suddenly realized that my mother was sitting across from me.

She was reaching out and touching me around my chest and stomach.

The front of my miko outfit was open, exposing my collarbone and navel.

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, I twisted my body, but my mother stopped me. "Do not move," she said to me harshly.

"I am merely reforming your body. It seems you have been neglecting your health… if we do not put some more meat on you, then your body will certainly weaken and that would lead to your early death."

Why was she picking *now* of all times to start saying things a normal mother would say?

For a while, my mother forced me to open my mouth and looked at my tongue. Was she satisfied now?

Either way, she shut her eyes and turned her face towards mine with her usual mask-like expression.

“Please allow me to ask you once again.”

She didn’t sound like she had come to hear my opinion though.

“This is the most generous compromise your mother is willing to offer. You have broken taboos, abandoned your post, and in your foolishness have even run away. In the past, I could make you listen through use of the whip. However, let us now reconsider that idea carefully.”

My mother sounded dead serious, like she would kill anybody who dared to utter even the smallest joke.

She was almost unrecognizable from the mother who had been surprised at the coldness of her ice cream back in the food court.

But no, this was… absolutely, unmistakably my mother.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

“Will you swear that you will never try to run from the shrine again and that you will work diligently as a Tsukuyomi miko for the sake of all the people in the world? If you swear it, your mother will forgive your sins… she will also stay by your side as you learn your craft, will lead you down the right paths, and will train you to be an exceptional Tsukuyomi miko.”

My head was swimming in confusion, and I couldn’t think straight.

I had been reduced to something like a beast. Maybe that was exactly why I could get out my true opinion.

”N-o-…”

I had told my mother that I would go back to being a Tsukuyomi miko at Mahoroba to get her to stop… but that was just a temporary stop measure, and I hadn't been telling the truth.

This drug… it stole away my humanity, and crushed the part of me that was human.

But the thought of having to maintain a world convenient for humans for no clear reason at all… the thought of having to take on the role that had killed my mother…

No thank you.

I didn't have to be a god or anything.

I was perfectly happy living a normal life.

I was happy.

There were still things I wanted to do.

I had finally escaped from my room and managed to take my first steps outside.

There were people who were cheering me on too.

I couldn't let myself to be discouraged here.

I had tried my very, very best, grit my teeth, and lived up until now.

There's really no point, mom.

Just because this was some tradition passed down by our ancestors doesn't mean I wanted to live in a system where I had to work for mankind without being allowed to ever question what I was doing.

"Don't… want to… I'm… going back… back home…"

"This is your home, Sasami."

"No… this… this isn't… home…"

"Do you still abandon the role the Heavens have bestowed upon you? You cannot be convinced otherwise?"

"It isn't… what I wanted…"

"As long as time allows for it, your mother will retrain you. Through a harsh regiment and hard work…"

"Don't… want to… I… won't try anymore."

"I see."

My mother gave me a small smile.

"Well, I suppose that leaves me with no choice."

Wha-…? Was she… letting me go?

-

My mother's fingertip pierced through my stomach.

-

I had been trying to smile, but my face froze in place.

My mother's thin finger had broken through the skin of my stomach, and was gouging into my innards.

Liquid which tasted of iron wound its way up my esophagus and blood flooded into my mouth.

I spat out a mouthful of fresh blood, dirtying my mother's face and her miko outfit.

Maybe it was because I was half-unconscious, but I felt no pain.

My mother stroked my head lovingly, and I felt some kind of liquid fill my belly.

"Ever since you were little, you have been prone to vomiting."

My mother spoke nostalgically, although her tone of voice never changed.

"If I fed this to you, you might have vomited it out, so I directly injected this medicine into your stomach. I have left you with a small amount of consciousness to make sure you understand the situation, but with this… you should completely lose your ability to think. I no longer have anything to ask you. And there is no longer anything you should say. I will no longer hope for any good to come out of a human like you."

Her blood-covered hands slipped out from my abdomen.

Bright red liquid dripped down from her fingers, staining the floor.

Through some alteration or other, the otherwise fatal wound in my stomach quickly sealed shut. My life was no longer in immediate danger.

I sure have been prone to getting hurt lately…

The medicine that had been forced into my stomach began circulating through my entire body.

I could not fight against it.

My consciousness almost violently slipped away, and the light vanished from both my eyes.

It felt almost like I was watching myself from somewhere far away overhead.

I just sat there, my eyes wide open but seeming asleep… like I was sleepwalking.

“How unfortunate.”

My mother took out a handkerchief and muttered regretfully while wiping my mouth.

“How very, very unfortunate.”

My mother slowly stood up, her face filled with a sense of loss. It was like she was a famous artist who just had to rip up an oil painting she had worked so hard to perfect.

Next, *someone* was kicked out in front of me. I hadn’t even noticed him before, probably because the room had been so dark. He was tied and bound with many lengths of rope.

He had hair that was quite long for a man, and his eyes were stern…

My father.

Perhaps he had been fed medicine already as well, but my father had the same empty look in his eyes as I had.

We were like a pair of Voodoo zombies.

We were puppets, and the merest tug on the strings on our back would get us to move.

In this state, both my father and I would probably do anything my mother said.

“This one has also proven a disappointment. He was always an incompetent, naïve man, but to think he not only allowed the Tsukuyomi Shrine to be destroyed so easily, but failed after he devised such a foolish plan… he is hopeless.”

My mother was probably talking about the scheme my father had dreamed up earlier.

“This man’s plans are at a standstill, and Sasami also does not seem to want to return to her post as a Tsukuyomi miko… I can force you to take medicine and control you like that, but as long as you harbor feelings of negativity towards your position, you will not be able to maintain the world correctly. There is no meaning in forcing you if you are unwilling to carry your duties out.”

At that point… I finally realized what conclusion my mother had reached.

At the same time, I felt my heart speed up rapidly in my chest.

“There is now only one thing left you must do.”

I don’t want to.

"*Bear a child*, Sasami. That child will inherit the power of the Supreme God, and will become the Tsukuyomi miko. After the ceremony of transfer is complete, you may vanish off to wherever you please. If you are unwilling to carry out your duties, then you have no worth to me. However, we must ensure the continuance of the Tsukuyomi bloodline."

I should've not been able to control my body at all, but I managed to force my mouth open.

I couldn't breathe. I felt like a fish on the chopping block.

I had believed. I had believed that no matter how inhuman and single-minded my mother may be about making sure the Tsukuyomi miko was doing her job… she would never resort to this. I had believed…

But my faith had been betrayed.

I loved my mother.

But my mother… she saw in me no value exceeding that of an excellent tool, meant to be used.

When I stopped fulfilling my duties, I was treated like a defective product and dealt with accordingly.

I had always known that, but tears still flowed from my eyes.

"The Tsukuyomi bloodline has persisted ever since Ninigi no Mikoto descended from the heavens, and has been preserved through incest. My body was never very strong, and I was unable to bear many children… so there are not many blood relatives to choose from. You will have to make do with him."

My mother pointed with her chin to the man who was supposed to be her husband, and told me that.

I understood the words that were flowing from her mouth, but I couldn't believe this.

"Don't… want to…"

I had been robbed of my freedom, so all I could manage to do was rock my body like I was throwing a tantrum.

The tears wouldn't stop.

"Don't… want… to… don't want… to…"

My mother was telling me… to make a child with my father.

Was there anything more merciless a mother could ever tell her child?

But my mother was completely serious.

She had chosen the best way to ensure that the Tsukuyomi bloodlines continued.

She was like a machine… there wasn't a hint of emotion in her voice.

Or, rather, she sounded like she was presenting the greatest honor in the world to her daughter.

It was like she was a loving parent, giving her failure of a daughter the chance to do some good.

“Do not whine. I am not asking for your opinion. Make a child with this man, and give birth to the next Tsukuyomi miko. I will raise that child and return things to the state in which they were meant to be. Your own child will fix all the chaos you have stirred up in this world.”

I understood that my mother was being serious.

My entire body shivered.

I felt disgusted… like my entire body had melted into an unrecognizable mess.

However… I spoke with the last bit of my strength.

“At least…”

I dared to wish that my mother had just a tiny bit of compassion remaining.

“At least… let it be… oniichan…”

If I had to make a child…

Then at least…

“I will not allow it.”

My mother instantly cut through my suggestion.

Cut through my wishes.

“That person has already been excommunicated from this family. He is not suited to taking part in making the splendid child that will be the next Tsukuyomi miko. He also committed the worst crime by running away with you. The Tsukuyomi Shrine will no longer tolerate dealing with that man.”

My mother then started mumbling, as if she had just remembered something.

“Also, that man… he came to this place earlier. Perhaps he wanted to save you? In either case, he requested a meeting and made quite an amount of noise outside our gates…”

My mother took out from somewhere the leather briefcase that my brother always used to cover his face… and then casually tossed it on the floor.

It was covered in blood.

I could feel my heart snapping in two.

“*Do not worry. I dealt with him.*”

All the strength left my eyes, and my entire body.

I had lost my will to live, and my body became limp like a corpse.

“You must first purify your body, Sasami. From what I have observed, there is still time before the most suitable period in your cycle. You will fast and we will burn incense as we hold a ceremony to pray for healthy children… oh my.”

I was already completely empty.

“Have you broken? It is of no consequence. As long as your body is healthy, there is no issue.”

As if that was a signal that she was done talking, my mother then walked out of the room.

@@@@@@

Like that, I was reduced to a state of near death.

What happened after that I only heard much later and second-hand.

"……"

My mother left the small room I was in and walked down the hallway.

There wasn't a single crack in her figure.

Her back was stretched straight, and she looked like some kind of beautiful wild animal.

She was walking through a half-destroyed building in the Tsukuyomi Shrine.

Maybe this building had just barely survived the attack, or maybe someone had used an alteration to rebuild it.

Either way, the building was only the size of a small residence. My mother strode leisurely through that building.

And then, she stopped in front of a room, and silently opened the door.

It was a dark room.

A dark room that clearly looked like a prison cell.

Light from the evening sun streamed in through the barred windows… not much time had actually passed since the battle at Mahoroba.

In the middle of that simple room, chained to a pillar to an almost unnecessary degree by his arms and legs… was my brother.

My brother should've been just a normal human, but somehow he had gotten to the Tsukuyomi Shrine in Kyuushuu all the way from our home near the capital… at that time, nobody knew how he had managed to do that.

"I came to explain to you what Sasami's last task will be."

My mother left the door wide open, and didn't even budge from her position.

My brother didn't have his face hidden, but because he was enshrouded in darkness it was impossible to make out his expression.

He seemed to be in great pain. His clothing, his hair, and his body all seemed to be tattered.

"She was being quite stubborn, so I resorted to using the drug. Although, the tipping point came only after I told her in a very roundabout way that you had perished. How irritating it is to see her attach herself so closely to such a *monster*."

My mother scowled and looked at my brother with disgust in her eyes even though she was the one who had greatly twisted this world's laws by returning from the dead.

"I may not have many human emotions left, but I did feel quite nauseous when I discovered your true nature. I would very much enjoy killing you if I could. I did not realize this until I had passed away, but you… how dare you live so shamelessly without any remorse whatsoever?"

"Do you really…"

My brother ignored my mother's insults, and weakly spoke up.

However, he was still using the same useless, pathetic tone I had grown used to.

"Do you really… intend to use Sasami as a tool to give birth to the next Tsukuyomi miko? Do you… do you not have any human… any motherly compassion left…?"

"The minute I crawled my way back out of Yomi, I ceased to be human."

My mother sounded a bit unhappy, or maybe a bit obstinate.

"Everything is for the sake of this world. For the sake of the humans in this world. I am a Tsukuyomi miko before I am that girl's mother."

My brother stared at my mother from the darkness, his eyes twinkling like the evening moon.

"Sasami-san really did love you, you know… *Juju-san.*"

"I understand. But that is of little importance… *older brother.*"

The sun sunk past the horizon, and a long night began.

Chapter 15: Personal Notes From the Yagami Sisters 3

It wasn't like everything was always happy.

In the past, Tsurugi-nee was even less motivated than she is now, and just went around in a daze, completely tired of the world. Kagami-nee didn't even talk much, let alone laugh. She cowered at even small noises and seemed to be always fighting an invisible enemy.

So, Tama had to smile.

Tama was also troubled. Though, her troubles might be pretty small compared to what Tsurugi-nee or Kagami-nee were going through. Tama was teased a lot for being so tall when she started going to school. She couldn't do anything right, and everyone else was afraid of her… it was hard.

But, Tama had to smile.

Tama couldn't do anything, but she could at least pretend to be happy and maybe drag Kagami-nee and Tsurugi-nee into being happy too. Even if they told her she was annoying or scolded her, she would try her best to do everything she could if it meant they would stop hating the world.

It would be bad for Tama to take the credit, but Tsurugi-nee and Kagami-nee both seemed to get more and more relaxed after they came into contact with Mamarin and the others. They also started to smile more and have more energy. All the awkwardness, all the coldness and emptiness that made Tama's chest hurt… Tama thought all of that had gone away.

But now, everything was broken again.

The peesefull days that everyone had tried so hard to earn… those days had been destroyed. Tama didn't hold a grudge against the person who did it.

Tama wasn't allowed to hate anyone. But, she would take those days back. Even though Tama couldn't do anything right, except for smiling.

Kagami-nee had also gotten angry at Tama.

Kagami-nee was probably hurting too, but when Tama did nothing but cry, she got angry. "You idiot. You're so useless. Should you really be crying right now?" she would say to Tama. She threw tissue boxes and oranges at Tama and chased her out of the house.

Where did she want Tama to go?

But Tama knew. Tsurugi-nee had fallen into the Underworld. Kagami-nee was full of holes and couldn't move. But, Tama was healthy. Only Tama was healthy. So, Tama had to do something. She was scared, and she couldn't stop crying, but she had to do something.

She at least had to be steady and walk forwards.

If Tama's prayers could come true, then gods above… please… allow Tama to grant everyone else's wishes.

Chapter 16: Mandala of Mother and Daughter (Back Half)

This part of the story I also heard much later and second-hand.

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The scene was now in the Corpse Ahakihara.

The home of the three Yagami sisters.

"……"

The second eldest Yagami sister, Kagami, awakened from her compact nap and checked the status of the wounds on her body.

Her appearance had mostly returned to normal through the help of alterations and her automated healing functionality, but she had been cut through by the magical god-killing blade Ame-no-Habakiri, so her spiritual side was still quite torn to shreds.

Under normal circumstances, Kagami would've definitely been okay.

But Yagami Kagami's existence as a God was being thrown off balance and in danger of crumbling… to put it in human terms, this would be like getting hit by a car and contracting influenza at the same time.

But Kagami didn't think she would die.

This was at least better than Tsurugi, who had been thrown into the Underworld.

Kagami sat up in bed, her breathing erratic.

She still had a long way to go in terms of recovery. She just barely managed to sit up, and she could do small things like move her fingers, but running or jumping or going into battle was out of the question.

She scowled at the pain she was feeling, and touched the place around her chest where she had been pierced. Kagami gasped.

“Sasami… san…”

She let out a bitter smile when she realized what she had just unconsciously muttered.

She didn’t have the right to say that girl’s name.

Kagami couldn’t do a single damn thing against that Tsukuyomi miko.

As both Sasami’s divine protector and her friend… she had failed.

She had been careless, and had let her pride get the best of her.

She had really thought they were invincible. That no enemy would be a match for the Yagami sisters… but that had been a huge mistake.

She had let her guard down and forgotten everything she had so diligently trained for. She suddenly felt disgusted at herself for trying to live such a carefree life.

“Were you worried about me, meat-chan?”

A white bunny rabbit was raising a fuss in the cage by Kagami’s side.

She probably wasn’t worried and just wanted to be fed, but just having someone next to her was enough to give Kagami strength.

She was on the verge of burying herself in self-reflection, but Kagami managed to revive herself a bit to toss some Cal*rie Mate (Note: Not suitable as bunny food) into the cage. She then began to think.

“Our opponent was the strongest Tsukuyomi miko, and she had received the protection of the King of the Underworld… Tama may be *like that*, but if she just rushes in without a plan it will only end in a second defeat.”

Kagami couldn’t even move well, but she had to help somehow.

“The King of the Underworld… in other words, the Hero God and the avatar of chaos… Sunanoo.”

That was the name of the enemy.

Susanoo-no-Mikoto.

He was one of the three direct descendants and a rightful heir to Izanagi and Izanami, the gods of creation, and stood alongside the Supreme God, Amaterasu, and the God of Suggestion, Tsukuyomi, as one of Japan’s most powerful deities.

That fierce hero was famed for exterminating the Yamata no Orochi, the worst of Japan’s evil gods (this god was the pure incarnation of evil and different from the monster who had appeared in the Yamata no Orochi SNS earlier). Even Amaterasu feared him, and even when he was rampaging through Takamagahara, all she could do was hide and tremble in the Amano-Iwato.

Right now, he was the King of the Underworld and hadn’t really been causing any trouble for a while, but…

“While Amaterasu stands for order and control, Susanoo stands for chaos and rebellion… it is unclear what motive he may have for lending his strength to the Tsukuyomi miko, but there is no enemy as dangerous as he is.”

Susanoo's divinity was just about as high as that of Amaterasu.

Amaterasu was technically higher ranked in the divine hierarchy, but Susanoo was unmatched when it came to battle.

Sure, Susanoo hadn't himself manifested in this world. All he had done was grant his favor to the Tsukuyomi miko and used the path of the Yomotsu Hirasaka to make her stronger.

But that was more than dangerous enough.

It's not like all of us on Amaterasu's side were flawless.

Right now, Sasami was probably getting her senses dulled with drugs so she wouldn't be able to use the power of the Supreme God freely.

Tsurugi was the only one able to take that power from Sasami, but she had fallen into the Underworld and couldn't interact with this plane of existence at all.

Kagami was defeated, and no matter how frustrating it was, she now had more than enough proof that she was no match for the Tsukuyomi miko.

There was no other option but to rely on Tama's *special characteristics*… but Tama had very little battle experience and was too kind to be able to easily hurt others.

Kagami had to at least push her a bit.

She was Tama's older sister, after all.

"Ugh, so bothersome, all of this…"

Kagami coughed, and then picked up the crimson-colored bundle of cloth that was resting near her pillow.

It was Tsurugi's weapon, which Tsurugi had used the last ounce of her strength to leave to Kagami in the present world.

"It's fortunate I have this GPS ability."

Kagami concentrated and pinpointed where Sasami was right now. She stood up on top of her futon.

She took the double-edged blade from the bundle and held it up clumsily like a girl.

"I don't care if you're the Tsukuyomi miko, or the Hero God…"

She poured all the spiritual energy she had left into the sword, and in a rare show of emotion, she roared out.

-

"Do not… underestimate the Yagami sisters!!"

-

And then, she threw the sword with all her strength.

The spiritual divine blade Ame-no-Murakumo easily pierced through the ceiling of the Corpse Ahakihara, and in an instant, ignored all laws of time and space to instantly teleport towards where Kagami wanted it to go.

But, Kagami couldn't even check to make sure it had hit its mark…

“I will leave… the rest to you… Tama.”

She tilted forwards and collapsed onto her futon before quickly falling into a sound sleep.

@@@@@@

The blade called the Ame-no-Murakumo soared through the air, defying all logic.

It ripped past everything as it flew from the capital area right for Kyuushuu…

When it almost instantly arrived at the half-destroyed Tsukuyomi Shrine, it immediately cut past the barrier and spiritual defenses that were erected around the perimeter.

Like that, it continued steadily forwards, rushing for the one small building that had been erected (whether through an alteration or something else) on top of the mountains of rubble. The blade went cleanly through the building’s ceiling before squarely hitting Kagami’s mark and landing right next to my shackled brother.

Krchh.

“Uwahh?! What was that?!”

It seemed that my brother had spent himself yelling after being locked in this room and had been hanging his head in exhaustion, but…

As expected, when a sword passes three millimeters from your head, you’d probably be surprised no matter what.

Kagami's aim was way too precise.

If she had been off by just a little bit, that sword would have gone right through my brother.

"This is…"

My brother recognized Tsurugi's blade.

No matter how dense my brother could be, he recognized that this was a complete godsend and grabbed the sword by the hilt.

"Very good! Now I can break through these chains, escape, and go save Sasami-san!"

My brother pulled out the sword and struck a cool pose, swinging the sword right into his chains!

"……"

The chains were still intact.

"Hm? Hmmmm? This is strange… this sword doesn't cut as well as I expected… well, it looks more like an ornament, so maybe the blade is pretty dull?"

My brother stood there and insulted one of the three divine weapons.

"Oh well. This isn't the time to be trying to look cool! Hyah! Hyah!"

Bam! Bam! Bam!

My brother used the blade like some piece of junk to somehow crush the chains, and then he stood up.

Thankfully, there was only one chain tying him to the pillar.

“Now I can get out of this… ugyahh?!”

My brother also had chains tying his hands and feet together.

It was one chain wrapped around both his arms and both his legs, so he couldn’t really move freely and ended up slamming his face into the ground as he fell forwards.

“Hmph, I won’t go down that easy…!”

My brother taunted the air. Good luck, oniichan…

Eventually, my brother found a way to stand up despite the chains around his limbs.

He held the sword with both hands and began to hop with both his feet.

He really didn’t have a way to break the chains binding him right now, so the only other way he would’ve been able to go forwards would be to crawl along on the floor like some inchworm. How lame would that be?

Well… granted, he was pretty lame.

Hoppity hoppity hoppity hop… like some new kind of demon, my brother moved around and sniffed me out with that sixth sense of his.

Luckily, all the mikos and other spiritualists at the Tsukuyomi Shrine had been gravely injured after falling out of the fourth floor window back at the Uzumenoana, and were all in the hospital.

So, there weren't really that many guards around. Hell, there wasn't anybody around at all.

My brother hopped around with all his might before arriving in front of one door.

"Hyah!"

He tackled the door and broke into the room.

In the middle of that room… was me, wearing what must've been a pretty chilly traditional Japanese kimono, after probably having cleansed myself.

I was lying sideways on my cot, and my consciousness was probably pretty dim right then, but I still looked at my brother with surprise in my eyes.

My father was also still tied up right next to me, and was looking down at me with empty eyes. My brother walked over to him… and hit him with a leaping kick!

"Hryaahhh!!"

My brother's aim was perfect, and my father went flying.

It was a merciless attack, especially since my father was completely defenseless. Wow, you're so cool, oniichan…

Also, it's not like my father really did anything wrong this time… well, whatever. I did get hurt before because of him. It's like a tax. A tax, yup. A tax, maybe…?

"Sasami-san!"

Like some kind of prisoner, my brother stared at me with chains binding his hands and feet.

Nothing was covering his face. It had been a long time since I've seen his bare face like this.

Maybe there was some secret magical power in that face of his, or maybe it was just because I had thought he was dead… but a spark of emotion lit up in my chest.

"Ah…"

The light of reason slowly filled my empty eyes again.

The power of the Supreme God neutralized the drugs in my system with alarming speed.

These drugs were a spiritual concoction meant specifically for the Tsukuyomi Miko. Up until now, I couldn't fight against it at all… so this must've been a miracle.

The power of love conquers all, and creates miracles…

"Onii… chan…"

I blinked a few times and stared at my brother who was squirming in front of me like a slug rather than a human being. Big, fat tears began to flow from my eyes.

I felt my state of mind clearing up.

I remembered everything. I also became aware of the situation I was in.

And also, my brother was still alive…

"Sasami-san, please don't cry. Everything will be fine. Your brother is here to save you."

My brother spoke the coolest words in the world to me while standing there shackled, looking like the uncoolest person in the world.

I felt my heart quiver at the very familiar sight of my brother acting like my brother.

“Oniichan… oniichan, oniichan!”

I wiped my eyes, and ran over with all my might to my brother who was still rolling around on the floor…

And then I kicked him.

Kick. Kick. Kick.

“Ow! … H-Hmm?! How did this happen?! Shouldn’t Sasami-san be saying ‘Oh, Oniichan, I love you~~!’ and giving me a kiss on the cheek right now?! Why am I being so abused right now?! Ah! Sasami-san must still be under the control of those drugs! And what should the prince do to lift that magical curse from the princess?! Well- Ow ow ow!”

“You came… to save me…”

I ground my foot into my brother’s face, and then screamed with all my might.

“Way way way too late! Buwaaaahhhhhh~~!!!”

I bawled, almost like I had regressed to a child or something.

“You idiot! Worthless piece of crap! Garbage! Ugly insect!”

I continued to moan, not knowing the meaning of the word “gratitude,” until I finally reached my limit.

“Fuehhhh…”

Tears leaked out from my eyes one after the other as I squatted down and continued to sob with my mouth wide open.

“Fueeehhhhh… ehhhh… ennnnn…”

“… Everything’s fine now, Sasami-san.”

My brother’s attitude didn’t change at all. He just looked at me and smiled kindly.

Even though I was acting like *that*…

“Your brother is here to protect you.”

I know.

@@@@@@

We worked together and used Tsurugi’s sword to break away my brother’s remaining chains.

Free from his restraints, my brother pulled me by the hand and supported me as we walked away from that room. I was still rather unsteady, it was as if the drugs still hadn’t gone completely out of my system.

Luckily, there was nobody in the building, and we proceeded towards the exit without incident.

Ah, we left my father behind, of course.

“So I guess mom was really acting alone…”

“Seems like it. Doesn’t feel like there’s anybody around.”

My brother said that even though he’s never been good at sensing others. But I looked at him and nodded.

“Well, the Tsukuyomi Shrine is here to exterminate any and all irregularities. My mom might have been one of the shrine heads at one point, but she came back from the Underworld, and I don’t think they can overlook it. They might even see her as an enemy.”

My mother was alone.

If we could just do something about her… then we might also be able to make it home safe.

“That mother of yours is quite troublesome, isn’t she?”

My brother let out a sigh.

“I thought I might try and persuade her at first, but she was harder to talk to than I imagined. So I realized I couldn’t convince her with just words. So I thought maybe I could just plead with her and tell her my true feelings, but your mother wouldn’t listen at all. She just punched me in the face and tied me up. Your mother is seriously strong, seriously terrible. I cried and begged her for mercy but she still wouldn’t let me go.”

“Oniichan, you sure are cool…”

Also, exactly how had my brother gotten to the Tsukuyomi Shrine?

He wasn't at Mahoroba when everything had happened, but he seemed to understand what was going on. This was just really strange.

Well, whatever. I don't really care about how my brother got here.

More importantly…

-

"Did you really think I would allow you to escape?"

-

We thought we would sneak through the window behind the house and escape through the garden out back… but we found ourselves directly in front of my mother, her back being illuminated by the full moon.

Well, of course. It's not like she was going to just shut up and let us leave.

She hadn't summoned any spirits to patrol the premises for her, but that was probably because she was confident that she could take care of any problems herself. Her confidence wasn't really misplaced either.

My brother was useless, and I was still in training as a spiritualist.

I might have the power of the Supreme God inside of me, but my mother also had received the protection of some other really important god… and her powers were on a completely different level to begin with.

Even the Yagami sisters hadn't been a match for her.

Fighting would be instant death here.

Just running would be exceedingly difficult.

What should I do…?

“I was quite surprised when that blade was thrown here and pierced through my barrier… but such is the Ame-no-Murakumo… it is a holy blade that purifies all evil. However, the fact that the blade was sent alone and that the swordsman remains to be seen… this must mean that those evil gods still cannot move.”

By “evil gods,” she probably meant Tsurugi and the others.

I mean, honestly, “evil gods” was just an insulting term for any god that did something that you didn’t like.

So to my mother, the Yagami sisters might well have been evil gods.

But I wouldn’t forgive her for calling them that.

I wouldn’t allow her to label Tsurugi and the others as evil, when they had tried so hard to protect me.

“Out of the way, mom.”

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

But, after what had happened a little bit ago… I had been disillusioned.

My mother saw me as nothing more than a tool.

My heart might have yearned for my mother before, but seeing her prioritize her duties as a miko above her duties as a mother had smashed that yearning to pieces.

All that was left was sorrow.

“I’m not going to make a child. This Tsukuyomi blood that I pointlessly inherited… it ends with me. That’s what I decided… I’ll return this world to chaos, to the state it was in before humans had warped it to their liking. That’s what… the world *really* should be like.”

I was barely able to stand on my own two feet without my brother supporting me, but I still desperately told my mother that.

They could hit me, could cause me pain, could brainwash me, could just use me as my mother’s tool… but I would neither break nor bend.

What exactly had this world given my mother? She tried so hard, so hard… threw away everything… ignored all the happiness that she could’ve gotten, just so she could do her duties. And what had that gotten her?

Nothing but suffering and death.

My mother probably understood that more than anybody else.

“There is no room for discussion.”

My mother wore her pure miko outfit, and carried her golden-ringed staff with a dark sense of pressure that no human should ever be expected to possess. An intense stink also drifted into the air from her body.

And then, she muttered a simple statement.

“Do not disappoint your mother further. If you cause any more trouble… I will no longer consider you my daughter.”

Her staff split into two, and the magical blade Ame-no-Habakiri appeared.

The blade shone, almost glistening.

Moonlight flew off it like specks of water.

“For every minute you spend in inactivity, pursuing worldly pleasures, other people have to work hard in your place. Yet you do not realize this and just seek more and more pleasure. If you are willing to so wantonly trample on your own reason for being, then I cannot call you a daughter.”

“Mom.”

I should already have fallen into despair long ago.

I should have already given up hope on getting through to my mother.

Yet, her words hurt me. They frightened me.

I felt like my body was tearing apart.

“I really loved you, mom. You didn’t smile very much, but you were always so kind to me. You were so cool, protecting the world like that… you were my hero.”

I ground my teeth together and then screamed.

“That Tsukuyomi Shrine used you to death and killed you! I’ll never accept them! I don’t care how important and great being a Tsukuyomi miko is! We’re just humans, not gods… we can’t do anything, but we can still find happiness!”

“Idiot daughter… remember that there are no words that can reach the dead.”

I would’ve expected that to be it.

I desperately argued with my mother, spit out all the words I could think of at her, and that was all I could do.

My mother might be a bit annoyed by it all, but that meant everything.

I could do nothing but hold my ground.

I just wanted to let my mother know that I wouldn’t do anything she asked of me.

If my mother got serious, then she could instantly kill me and my brother.

But… just before she could come rushing at us with the magical blade she had already prepared, my mother suddenly turned in another direction.

Her back was now to us, and she readied her blade.

I also had noticed.

There was some immense force coming our way.

The garden behind the Tsukuyomi Shrine was covered in moss, but was wide and didn’t have many trees in it, giving us a clear view.

Looking across that garden, I saw someone in the distance walking across the boundary line that separated the shrine from the outside world.

She passed under the shrine torii[1], and I recognized who she was.

[1] A large gate.

Whether she was standing, sitting, or walking, she was just a dazzling flower.

The third Yagami sister, Tama, walked slowly towards us while looking all around her. She was every bit the picture of beauty as she usually was.

And then, she lifted her face and saw us there.

She suddenly leapt for us, and then the battle started! … Is what I wished would've happened. Wouldn't that have been cool?

Instead, the minute Tama saw us, she walked towards us and stopped around ten meters away from us.

"……"

She began to tremble.

And then, completely ignoring my mother, who was staring at her warily with her sword raised, Tama began to shout in a ridiculously loud voice.

-

"This place was soooooooo faaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrr!!!! Ughhhhhh!!!"

-

Tears dropped from her eyes, one after the other.

She desperately wiped her eyes again and again.

Tama stamped her feat like a child.

“Ugh… *sniff*… it was so far! *Sob*… Tama got kicked out and had to save Mamarin, but didn’t know where to go… last time Tama came, she was just following Kagami-nee, so she couldn’t remember… couldn’t remember where… so she got lost… fuehhh… fueehhhhh~~…”

Was she okay?

“T-Tama went to the police box, and wanted to ask where to go, but… but, all she could remember was that it was in Kyuushuu! So she told them that, and, and… they thought she was making fun of them! They got angry! U-Uuu… Tama didn’t do anything wrong! And Mamarin, she was in… in a bare-ee-err? So Tama couldn’t sense her for a long time… and when she did she tried so hard and ran, but she tripped and fell!”

Wow, she was seriously sobbing.

She really did look like a lost child.

“Ugh… *sniff*… Tama won’t ever forgive you! Tama’s going to beat the person who did these bad things to Tsurugi-nee and the others, and then Tama’s going to go home with Mamarin! Okay?!”

It felt like Tama was just throwing a tantrum, but it was rare to see Tama express anger like this.

Even my mother didn’t seem to know how to react after seeing Tama in such a pathetic state. She still kept her sword up, but she let out a derisive laugh.

“Your reinforcements are here, it seems. She seems quite dependable, I must say.”

“Uuu…”

I moaned.

Tama was the one acting like that, but for some reason I felt embarrassed.

But… that was all the time I had to relax.

@@@@@@

Tama suddenly vanished.

"……?!"

Tama had disappeared, like she had been some kind of optical illusion.

"Uguuu… *sniff*… *sob*."

I could hear someone crying now right behind me.

"Mamarin, let me borrow this."

I had no idea how Tama had moved behind me, but she quickly snatched away the sword from my hand and wiped her tears away again before facing my mother.

It was like she had moved from beginning to end, but ignored everything in between.

I was reminded of how my mother had moved back at Mahoroba.

"Eh…?"

I was shocked at how Tama had seemingly ignored all the laws of physics. But then…

“The gods only exist where they do.”

My mother put her guard back up and quickly faced us.

It seemed she had realized that Tama was a much more dangerous opponent than her behavior might suggest.

“The gods, at their cores, are conceptual beings. The more divinity they possess, the more they are able to manifest themselves in this world. You can say that they exist where humans believe in them, but they can exploit the cracks of that belief to warp their own beings and reconstruct themselves elsewhere. In that way they are able to telepo-“

“I don’t understand hard things like that... Tama is just an elementary schooler!”

Tama still had tears mixed in with her words as she gripped her sword heavily with both hands.

“But, Kagami-nee told me… I don’t have to understand, but I can do it. It’s like walking, or breathing. *Tama can do it.* If Tama can just believe…”

I bet she had heard that from Kagami or someone. That’s why she was having this Zen-like dialogue with herself...

Tama yelled out.

“It’s not about who’s smarter… it’s about who can try harder!”

The magical blade Tama was holding disappeared for just a moment.

I heard the sound of something shattering.

"…?!"

The magical blade my mother was holding suddenly disappeared from the hilt onwards.

The blade itself had broken into small pieces and dissipated into beads of light before vanishing.

Tama had thrown the divine blade Ame-no-Murakumo, but I hadn't realized this until I saw the blade materialize at my mother's feet, stuck deep into the ground.

She had teleported the sword and forced it into the same physical space as the magical blade my mother wielded.

After that, it was just a matter of which blade was stronger.

And according to legend, the Ame-no-Habakiri was more fragile than the Ame-no-Murakumo.

It was weak, and its divinity was low.

So, of course it would shatter.

"That's Tsurugi-nee's sword! Don't take it!"

Tama raised her voice, and at the same time the sword returned to Tama's hands, as if it had a will of its own.

Tama seemed finished with her sword, and handed it casually back to me. "Here you go!" she added lightly.

“Wha-..?!”

Her blade suddenly reduced to just a hilt, my mother tossed her weapon away and took out a few charms.

It was a bit late, but my mother seemed to now realize how much she had been underestimating this girl who had done nothing but cry and raise a fuss back at Mahoroba.

I never expected my mother to be this careless.

“Mamarin called you ‘mom’…”

Tama once again moved supernaturally quickly and bore down on my mother from the side.

Her beautiful, long hair shone in the moonlight.

“You’re her mom, aren’t you? But… Mamarin was crying! You’re her mom… right? Don’t be so mean to your daughter!”

Tama’s words were childish and devoid of reason.

Yet, her words, her feelings… they reverberated in my chest.

Yes.

It wasn’t about the Tsukuyomi miko, or the shrine, or duties or whatever.

It wasn’t about reason.

We were mother and daughter, so this wasn’t the place to haughtily argue about what was “right” or “wrong.”

“Fueeehhhh…”

I sobbed, on the verge of throwing a tantrum.

“*You. Idioootttt!!*”

Tama haphazardly swung her fist.

And then, my mother’s right shoulder and most of her abdomen, as well as her right arm and a part of her head… they all vanished.

@@@@@@

“……?!”

What had happened was completely impossible.

When it came to battles between gods, I really had no idea what was going on.

“I was… eaten…?!”

My mother staggered to the side, her face completely in shock at seeing a third of her body disappear.

Tama just let her momentum carry her forward, and couldn’t recover to send out a followup attack.

“D-Don’t move, ugh! You’re a bad bad person… so Tama is going to eat you in one gulp!”

Even as she sobbed, Tama shouted out some rather terrifying things.

My mother seemed to come to a realization.

“Eating other gods… I see… you must be a new-generation god! A god born to bring the world into a new era…!!”

I saw my mother’s expression become clearly distressed.

Or no, perhaps it was fear. The fear of a human who had confronted a god.

“Just like Zeus vanquished Cronus, like the Northern European gods who were defeated and slaughtered at Ragnarok, like the life source Purusa who was sacrificed for materials to create the new world… old gods are exterminated by new gods. When the world reaches its limits, the new come into power, and either expel or commit genocide on the old!”

Yes… Tsurugi had created Tama to be the next Supreme God.

She was one of the new deities.

In every myth known to man, the incompetent or perhaps tyrannical old gods were always vanquished by the new.

The old world may have had a Supreme God, but that Supreme God was nothing more than fodder for growth to the new-generation god.

This new-generation god would eat the old gods and add them as flesh and blood to her own body.

I see… that was Tama’s special ability.

It didn't matter that an extremely strong god was protecting my mother. Tama was a new god, eating the old and ignoring all matters of rank.

All the other gods would be fed to her, and would be used as a foundation for building the new world.

"G-Ghhh… impossible! To think the Supreme God would attempt to create a new-generation god… just impossible! Our sun… our sun is trying to put an end to this sublimely beautiful, unique myth that has been continuing from time immemorial! Our sun!"

My mother was clearly flustered.

But I didn't blame her.

If a next-generation god had been created, that signaled that the old gods were no longer needed.

Even the Supreme God Amaterasu herself, who lived on through the power of the Supreme God and was supporting the Tsukuyomi clan, would lose her standing and disappear.

She would lose the very reasons and motivations she had for her actions.

She was probably feeling anxious, like the floor was giving way under her.

"I will never accept this… I will never accept the birth of a new-generation god…!!"

My mother held up countless more charms and aimed them at Tama.

For some reason… I felt a pang of pity for her.

My mother had sacrificed her entire life to being a Tsukuyomi miko.

And right now, it was as if the meaning of her life was being rejected.

So, my mother felt lost, panicked… and finally let down her guard.

She was so busy trying to eliminate Tama in order to regain her own position in the world that she took her attention completely off us.

That's why, I might be just a novice spiritualist still in the middle of learning…

I might be a worthless girl who had run away before completing her training…

But in that moment, I managed to trip her up.

@@@@@@

"… Uguu…?"

My mother looked at me.

And then, her shoulders began to tremble, almost as if she was crying.

"The Chant… of Returning Roads…?!"

I made a seal with my hands and cast a curse on my mother.

The Chant of Returning Roads was a spiritual method that would bind and seal every kind of irregularity.

I had imitated my mother so much in the past that this was the one thing I had gotten a lot of practice with.

“S-Sasami… y-you…”

My mother was completely stiff, not able to move a single finger.

With my level of spiritual power, I wouldn’t be able to hold my mother for longer than a few seconds.

“You think your mother… the mother who experienced unmistakable pain giving birth to you… is an irregularity?!”

Yes, casting the Chant of Returning Roads on my mother meant exactly that.

This was the final expression of what I felt.

“I’m sorry, mom…”

I felt something hot running down my cheeks.

“P-Please… forgive me…”

My mother should’ve already completely ripped our mother-daughter relationship to shreds.

I should’ve already been disillusioned and lost any and all hope for her.

But, my chest was in agony… almost like it was going to burst apart. Tears flowed from my eyes.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

For that purpose, I had practiced so much… practiced this Chant of Returning Roads that my mother had taught me, so I could defeat evil and be cool like her.

But, mom… I'm sorry… I couldn't ever become that hero.

I couldn't become… like you.

"Go back…"

Tama didn't let this opportunity go and leapt at my mother, pushing her with both hands.

"… to the Underworld!"

Another hole was gouged into my mother's body as she tipped backwards…

And right behind her, the air buzzed and opened into a dark hole.

My mother's eyes widened and twisted her body, trying to escape from the inky blackness behind her.

However, at that moment, slender arms reached out from the hole.

-

"Oh helloo~~. Mom, thanks for the other day."

-

Whose voice was that?

“But perhaps we should have juuuust a quick little chat about your career plans for your daughter over there.”

Thin fingers grabbed onto my mother’s miko outfit and dragged her into the darkness.

“Gh… this is…”

My mother seemed to understand what was going on, and her face paled.

“Do not be so coarse, you damned evil gods…! Are you really this indifferent towards what becomes of this world?! If I cannot restore this world to its proper state… I will never die, even if you kill me!”

My mother squirmed and tried to struggle, but she was already originally a corpse, and so she seemed especially drawn to the hole and fell right in.

“Umm… Tama, sorry.”

As the hole closed up, all we heard was a voice speaking casually to us through it, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

-

“Your sis has a lot of work to do, so take care of the house while she’s gone!”

-

That voice soon faded away, and the hole connected to the Yomotsu Hirasaka also vanished from this world.

Together with my mother.

Only dead silence remained.

I finally released my Chant of Returning Roads pose and collapsed to the floor.

The desolate moon remained shining in the sky, still waiting for the first hints of the morning sun.

Chapter 17: My Beloved Mother

“Sasamisaan~~.”

My brother was calling me.

I didn’t answer but just curled up into a ball on my bed.

I had already taken three days off from school.

I could blame the drugs that had been forced into my system at the Tsukuyomi Shrine or just the exhaustion that had built up from those events, but the real problem was more psychological.

There was the confrontation with my mother, her words and her actions, and then our eternal farewell.

All those things had forced me to look back at myself and reflect on my actions. They had opened wounds that I could no longer ignore.

I couldn’t stand being a Tsukuyomi miko; so, I escaped from reality and greatly betrayed the expectations of my elders… that fact was now painfully clear to me.

I had also trampled on the promise I made with my mother on her deathbed.

-- *Take care of the world for me.*

-- *Leave it to me, mom.*

I was a liar.

“Sasami-saaan~~.”

My brother now also began to knock on the door.

He usually would just unlock the door and barge in without asking, but one time he did that and I ferociously snapped at him and showered him with abuse, so now he learned to be a bit more careful and tactful.

Sorry, oniichan… for making you worry.

I'm not going to sit here and sulk forever.

I also wanted to put on my clothes, pick up my schoolbag, open the door, and go to school.

That's exactly what I had wished for.

Until I had betrayed my mother's trust, that's what I had desired.

But, the minute I stepped out of my room, I felt nauseous.

"Tsukuyomi miko." "Power of the Supreme God." "A world convenient for humans." All these buzzwords buzzed around in the back of my head, and my mother's voice echoed in my skull.

I would feel nauseous and lock myself in my room. That had happened over and over these past few days.

I don't think my mother had cursed me or anything.

No, the problem was with my own mind.

I was weak, so I had caught myself in my own mental trap. *Is it really okay for me to just keep on looking out for only my own happiness and keep on living peacefully when it means trampling on everyone else's feelings and even forcing my mom to become a monster crawling its way back from the Underworld?* That's all I could think about.

When I smiled, I suddenly could hear my mother's voice in my head.

When I began to think I was happy, I suddenly smelled something rotting.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"Sasami-san, please at least try to eat something."

I could hear my brother.

I had a long history of being a hikikomori, so he was used to behavior like this and could deal with it pretty calmly.

… Had I regressed into shutting myself in again?

I didn't really have the energy to speak right now. I could only manage to move my lips in that dark room.

You don't have to tell me that. I won't die if I don't eat for a little bit, I thought.

Just put the food in front of the door. I'll eat it later.

"Understood."

Seems like the message got across.

“Your oniichan made you his delicious special ramen today~~. If you don’t eat it quickly it’ll go stale. Also, there’s some of your oniichan’s love for dessert~~.”

I don’t need the dessert, so take that back with you.

“Understood. That’s too bad…”

The message got across?!

“Well, jokes aside, there was also a package delivered today, so I’ll also set that outside your door. If you need anything at all, I’ll be downstairs~~.”

My brother left off with those kind words and slowly left.

… A package?

I wonder what it is… I was really curious, but I didn’t have the willpower to get up.

“… Hm?”

My cell phone was blinking.

Maybe Kagami was calling me.

She had already sent me lots and lots of emails.

Kagami was in way worse shape than I was too, but here she was worrying about me…

I slowly dragged my cell phone up before my eyes, and then felt a wave of surprise.

It was from a number I didn’t recognize.

And yet, even though I didn't remember ever adding this number to my contact list, the name "Tsurugi-chan" was displayed on my cell phone screen.

"Tsurugi…?"

Tsurugi had fallen into the Underworld, and she shouldn't have returned yet.

I hurriedly pushed the accept button on my phone and put my ear to the receiver.

"Hello…?"

"Ah, the call got through! It's me, it's me! I got into a car accident you see, and I gotta pay some damages, so please transfer over five-hundred-thousand yen!"

Why did she sound like she was trying to scam me?

Well, granted, now I was *sure* this was Tsurugi.

"What's wrong, Tsurugi…? Also, weren't you supposed to be in the Underworld…?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with you too? Geez, you sound gloomy… ahh, I tried my best to alter this phone so I could get this call all the way through to you. Let's try to keep this short so I don't get tired out. 'Kay?"

Now that I thought about it, she also had altered a phone so she could talk to Tama while Tama was in that UFO thing, right?

Cell phones sure were convenient.

”Well, anyways, thought I’d just call ya. I won’t be back until I beat up my cocky idiot of a little brother some more, so take care of my sisters for me. Those girls are probably so lonely without me and bawling their eyes out every day, so be sure you watch over them for me… fufufufu.”

“Actually, from what I’ve seen in Kagami’s emails, all the gaps in her heart are being filled by that bunny she started raising, so I think they’ll be okay for now.”

What a resilient lot.

At any rate, I guess this brother, Susanoo, that Tsurugi was talking about was the mastermind behind this entire fair.

This was Tsurugi we were talking about, so she would probably take care of everything and then come back like nothing had happened.

”The Ame-no-Murakumo is my avatar, and I left it over there before coming down, so I’m going to use it like Ariadne’s thread to find my way back. Well, I don’t think you’ll really understand even if I explain it all, so just don’t worry! It’s not like I’m dead, and I sure as hell don’t want to stay down here for too much longer, so I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

As always, she was talking about something miraculous but in the most casual tone in the world.

”Ah, also… I wanted to talk to you about your mother…”

I heard Tsurugi pause (which was rare for her), and after a few moments she began to speak. But this time there was no hint of joking in her voice.

”When I dragged her back into Yomotsu Hirasaka, she had already been mostly eaten by Tama and was almost completely in pieces. But she’s not completely gone, so give it time and she might recover her spiritual energy and might even revive. But she shouldn’t be able to do anything for now… that’s all.”

“I-I see…”

I didn’t know how to respond to that.

My mother should’ve been able to rest peacefully in the afterlife, but I disturbed her.

And when she was a living corpse, I had caused her trouble, hurt her, and betrayed her… I had trampled her beneath me.

”Don’t get too hung up about it… well, I guess you’re going to even if I tell you not to. But, you went so far as to turn your blade towards your own mother to get on this path you’re walking, so if you give up and stop now, that would just be disrespectful. Just keep looking forwards and walk on, okay? Promise Tsurugi-chan you’ll do that.”

Tsurugi finished that with a bit of cheerfulness seeping back into her voice, but then she seemed to remember something.

”Ah right, when I was tumbling down back into Yomotsu Hirasaka with your mom, I think she dropped something. It’s not like I’m trying to send you random souvenirs or anything, but… it had your scent on it, so I thought it might’ve been yours or something and delivered it to you.”

“Eh… what could it be?”

I honestly had no idea.

Also, you can send mail from the Underworld?

Well, I guess she probably used an alteration to be able to do that.

”I’m getting pretty tired, so I’m hanging up.”

“Ah, wait, Tsurugi… U-Umm, thanks, for calling.”

I had to thank everyone. Kagami, Tama, and my brother too…

I might’ve gotten hurt, but it’s not like I had gone completely off course and had fallen into the depths of Hell.

And it was everyone… who had saved me. Because of everyone, I had managed to come back.

So, I really had to go give my thanks to each and every one of them.

“I’m going to try hard. For a bit more. I’ll rest for a bit longer, but then I’ll try hard again.”

”Yeah. Just don’t overdo it… good luck.”

Tsurugi spoke to me in the kindest, strictest tone in the world before I heard her voice cut out.

I stared off into space for a while.

I suddenly remembered something, and managed to drag my heavy, lead-like body out of bed.

I had been bed-ridden for a long time, so I could feel my joints creak.

I felt a bit dizzy, but I softly walked to the door and opened it.

I saw a tray there, steam still rising from the bowl of ramen resting on it.

And also… a package that looked insanely ordinary for just having come from the Underworld.

I squatted down and began to awkwardly peel away the packaging.

"……"

A stuffed bunny appeared.

It was a bit bloodstained though.

-

-- *"Ah, dammit. This is hard… I really want that bunny rabbit over there…"*

-- *"Leave this to your mother."*

-

"Uuu, uuu… uuu."

Tears began to flow.

It felt like a giant dam of emotion had broken all at once, and each feeling was condensing and leaking out of my eyes one by one as tears.

I picked up that stuffed bunny… the extremely ordinary stuffed bunny, but the only thing I had ever gotten with my mom while shopping… and hugged it close to me.

I felt no warmth. Just loss, and guilt…

And a dull pain running through my heart.

“Uwaaah, uuu, aahhhh…”

I cried.

And gasped for air like a newborn calf.

I loved my mother.

I wanted to become like my mother.

But, even in death, my mother would never forgive me.

Afterword

Good afternoon. This is Akira.

I'm happy to bring you the second volume of this (not really) slice of life tale of Japanese mythology (?), Sasami-san@Ganbaranai. As usual, I organized the work into three parts: one to depict the special, rather strange point of view I want readers to feel from this work, one to delve into character relationships, and one to touch upon a grander story that gets to the roots of this work.

At any rate, please find some more pointless ramblings below.

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@ More on the Self-Aware Protagonist. Just like I had written in the afterword of the first volume, I wanted to not hold back and adopt a rather experimental point of view for this story.

What if the protagonist were to have the power of the Supreme God? How would that person deal with it psychologically, and how would other entities with similar levels of divinity (the Yagami sisters, etc.) treat the protagonist? By exploring these questions, the story's point of view and atmosphere, its measure of reality and chaos, they all fluctuate.

In this case, the power of the Supreme God lies within our protagonist, Tsukuyomi Sasami, and she is aware of it and is very careful to control her emotions so the other gods keep relatively in check and do not go wild and cause all sorts of fantastical things to happen. In other words, it is difficult for the present world to turn to chaos, and the world appears relatively stable. This is probably the most calm, plain atmosphere this series has to offer.

Afterword

There are gods with similar levels of divinity like the Hero God Susanoo or Yagami Tama, and those gods act with relative freedom (e.g. aliens), but the other gods either show loyalty to Sasami-san or wish to curry favor with her, so the only entities that end up a threat to Sasami-san's daily life become humans themselves, who occupy a somewhat special place in the divine hierarchy.

In the third volume, we will see that Sasami-san has sunk into depression from the events of Volume 2, and because of that is no longer able to maintain the world, which then falls into chaos. In order to cheer her up, the Yagami sisters and the other gods run rampant with their alterations, not able to control themselves, and the world becomes the crazy place right out of the Ama-no-Iwato myth.

This volume turned a bit towards the serious side, so as described I hope to screw around a lot more in the next volume.

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@ Thanks to the following people. To Hoshino-san, my quick-footed manager, who was so fast to set up meetings or pick up the phone whenever I had any problems. To Hidari-san, the artist for this series, who has filled this world with color using his beautiful drawings that have so much depth. And to the readers, who have been watching this entire story unfold from the point of view of the gods.

Let's try hard again next time.

- Akira

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